

# Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women Leadership in Hong Kong



Despite the efforts towards gender equality, under-representation of women still exists in the workplace where many believe that there is an invisible barrier – a glass ceiling that prevents women from getting ahead in business.



(From left to right) Ms. Su-Mei Thompson, Chief Executive Officer, The Women's Foundation; Ms. Nancy Hong, mentor and Ms. Kitty Yip, protégé of Mentoring Program for Women Leaders.

**W**e cannot deny that men for years are in the majority among senior levels of positions whilst women are still concentrated in the lower categories. According to recent government statistics, women make up 53 percent of the Hong Kong workforce but hold only 29 percent of leadership positions versus female management representation rates in the United States and Australia.

In other words, Hong Kong's women are devalued and under-utilised at the most senior levels across numerous professions and industries, which reflected the larger legacy of gender bias and imbalance in the workplace. Why is it that women seldom reach the highest ranks in business even though there are an increasing number of women entering the workforce?

Given the phenomenon of gender imbalance in our society, some think that there is a need for us to foster a supportive environment in which women are provided with equal opportunities to strengthen their capacity to engage as leaders for progressive change. This is what led to the establishment of The Women's Foundation (TWF) in 2004.

## The Women's Foundation

"The aim of the Foundation is to improve women's status and empower them to achieve a better quality of life in Hong Kong. By encouraging women to break through the glass ceiling, we hope that we could eliminate the barriers that prevent women from obtaining leadership opportunities and achieving their full potential," says Ms. Su-Mei Thompson, Chief Executive Officer, The Women's Foundation.

With such great aspiration, the Foundation launched The Women's Foundation's Mentoring Program for Women Leaders three years ago which aims to provide young professional women with a wide range of opportunities to unleash their potential.

"The program is part of our ongoing commitment to help 'smash the glass ceiling' within Hong Kong's professional business community to address the low numbers of women in senior management roles. In this program, we provide participants with a breadth of opportunities for mutual learning and professional and personal development, including one-on-one mentoring, inspirational talks, panel discussions, tailored workshops, mentoring circles and social events to help protégés develop their communication skills, analytic skills and positive thinking," she explains.

## Mentoring Program for Women Leaders

Since its inauguration in 2009, over 150 women in Hong Kong have been benefiting from the program. The program consistently attracts talent women from across a range of industries and professions, allowing for different perspectives, multi-dimensional sharing and extensive networking

Every September, 100 participants comprising 50 mentors and 50 protégés are enrolled in the year-long program which is free of charge for participants. The 50 high potential protégés are matched with experienced female mentors drawn Hong Kong's successful businesswomen, entrepreneurs, women in media, NGO leaders and academics.

"Mentors and protégés meet at least six times during the program. Meanwhile, every four to six weeks, we have talks, seminars and receptions that facilitate networking and peer-to-peer learning. What's new for this year's program is that we will increase the number of mentoring circles, allowing more structured



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With a strong reputation at the heart of Hong Kong's financial and business community, the Foundation really makes a big difference to many women of all ages. "We are so glad that our program is supported by a diverse range of leading organisations and corporations in Hong Kong including Bank of America Merrill Lynch, J.P. Morgan, Macquarie, Morgan Stanley, National Australia Bank, Bloomberg, Thomson Reuters, UBS, etc."

To be eligible to join the program, protégés should have a minimum of five years' full-time work experience and they should be open and willing to learn from others and highly motivated to achieve professional success. Meanwhile, mentors should have a minimum of ten years' managerial experience and should be eager to help younger women achieve their full potential.

## Diversity in the Workplace

Ms. Nancy Hong, who has extensive leadership experience in the business sector, was one of the prominent mentors for last year's program. As an Executive Director and Head of Human Resources for Private Banking Asia at J.P. Morgan, Ms. Hong has her own team and has to work closely with senior management to develop and implement HR strategies that align with the bank's business objectives. She is a very good example of a successful woman leader in Hong Kong.

When it comes to women in leadership, Ms. Hong believes that the top management of organisations should create an atmosphere of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, which is conducive to the professional development of women leaders. "Promoting diversity and respect in the workplace is integral to an organisation's culture and success. I think we need to have the mindset that we believe we are able to break through the traditional thinking that women can only be housewives and need to bear all the family responsibilities," she says.

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# J.P. Morgan

Being Executive Director and Head of Human Resources for Private Banking Asia at J.P. Morgan, Ms. Nancy Hong believes that promoting diversity in the workplace is conducive to the development of women leaders.





## Concept



Successful women leaders are invited to hold panel discussions as part of the program's activities.



Seasoned female mentors are invited to share their experience with the participants.

### Family-friendly Policies

In fact, more organisations nowadays are beginning to promote gender equality through family-friendly policies. For example, according to Ms. Hong, J.P. Morgan is at the forefront in this area with male staff being entitled to take paternity leave and all staff being offered adoption leave. "Though policies in an organisation cannot be changed overnight, I do think that organisations should do something step by step to create a corporate culture that facilitates better family planning and work/life balance for employees, whether male or female."

As a busy executive who leads a team in the large investment bank, how does Ms. Hong strike a balance between her work and family? The key is self-discipline, clear priority and time management.

She says, "If you want to achieve work/life balance, you have to be self-disciplined and follow your schedule as much as possible. For example, I set aside the time to have dinner with my family every Friday night and my boss and colleagues know how important this is to me. They also know I will work like crazy the rest of the week – and over the weekend if necessary - to get the work done. It's all about good time management. Set priorities for things you need to do and be determined to finish the tasks."

As Ms. Hong reveals, one of the reasons she participated in the TWF program as a mentor was to help young women establish positive mindsets and self-confidence, whilst guiding them to learn the importance of setting priorities in their lives, so that they can make the right choice and decisions. "Sometimes,

talking with the protégés also led me to revisit my own issues in career and personal life and inspired new thinking. No matter what position you are in, you have to keep learning in different ways and create opportunities for exposure. Be brave enough to take up new challenges and opportunities to learn every day!"

### A Boost to Self-confidence

Ms. Kitty Yip was one of the outstanding protégés from last year's program. She works as an officer for the Children & Youth Service at The Hong Kong Council of Social Service. She really appreciates the program as it has helped her review and identify her own goals in life.

"Through the program, I have had the opportunity to meet women from many other sectors and professions and to make many new friends from different backgrounds. TWF also invited many women civic and business leaders to share with us their own journeys and key learnings from their own experience. I feel that the program gave me more self-confidence and really strengthened my communication and networking skills. The mentoring circles were also a great way to discuss challenging situations with other mentors and protégés," she says.

Meanwhile, she expresses her gratitude to Ms. Hong for being so generous and supportive about providing her with good ideas and career advice. "Ms. Hong is a high flying HR expert and I really learnt a lot from her, especially in relation to networking and communication skills. I would say having completed the program is a breakthrough moment for me!" **A**



An information session was held in early September for the enrolment of participants for the year 2011-2012.



The Women's Foundation is a Hong Kong registered not-for-profit organisation dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls in Hong Kong. Through its published research on gender studies and women's status in Hong Kong, the Foundation has identified women's economic self-reliance as a critical issue for Hong Kong. TWF programs are focused on challenging gender stereotypes, increasing the number of women in decision-making and leadership roles, and empowering women in poverty to achieve a better quality of life for themselves and their families.