

INSIGHT

Lines of equality

Su-Mei Thompson and Jo Baker say while Hong Kong may be ahead of others in protecting the rights of women, it still has some way to go to ensure their full and equal participation in all aspects of society

Later this year, Hong Kong will come under the microscope of a UN committee reviewing the city's compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw). While Hong Kong is ahead of many other societies in protecting the human rights of women, big gaps remain, and The Women's Foundation has submitted a "shadow report" to inform the committee's analysis.

The gaps we have identified are wide-ranging and affect women and girls across age bands and social strata. Chief among them is the feminisation of poverty, reflected in the lack of specific consideration given to elderly women in the government's budget for health care and the fact that, because many were not part of the formal workforce, they do not receive any benefits from the Mandatory Provident Fund scheme. This is all despite the fact women are outliving men by an average of six years.

Too little is being done to combat harmful gender stereotypes in media and advertising

In addition, middle-aged women hold the greatest number of casual, part-time and poorly paid jobs, representing the bulk of the workforce in catering, caring, cleaning and on cashier's desks.

A review of the minimal protections and benefits afforded part-time and casual workers is urgently required, along with re-training programmes that offer technical, financial and management training paired with employment opportunities that take into account the caring obligations for the elderly and children borne by many of these women.

Indeed, while Hong Kong has a number of public and NGO-run schemes that provide fully or partially subsidised services for children, the elderly and the disabled, there are too few of them due to traditional gender roles and stereotypes. This places a burden on female family members in Hong Kong.

In terms of the private-sector care market, this is restricted largely to the 10 per cent of families who can meet the financial and other requirements for hiring a foreign domestic helper. Easing the full-time and

live-in requirements for foreign domestic helpers would open up the part-time care market for families who cannot afford or don't have space to employ a helper, thereby restricting the ability of women to work.

This would also, critically, allow greater protection for foreign domestic workers, who can find themselves trapped in abusive conditions, and align with the UN committee's 2006 recommendations to "implement a more flexible policy regarding foreign domestic workers" and protect them from abuses. In a recent survey by the Women's Commission, many women cited caring for family members as the main reason they dropped out of the workforce. This is in a context where flexible working hours or options to work part-time or from home are rare in most sectors and professions.

Hong Kong's paid maternity leave entitlement is among the lowest in Asia and the government's plans to introduce paternity leave seem to have stalled. In the long term, Hong Kong should embrace the concept of gender-neutral parental leave, allowing parents to choose which of them assumes the greater share of child-care responsibilities.

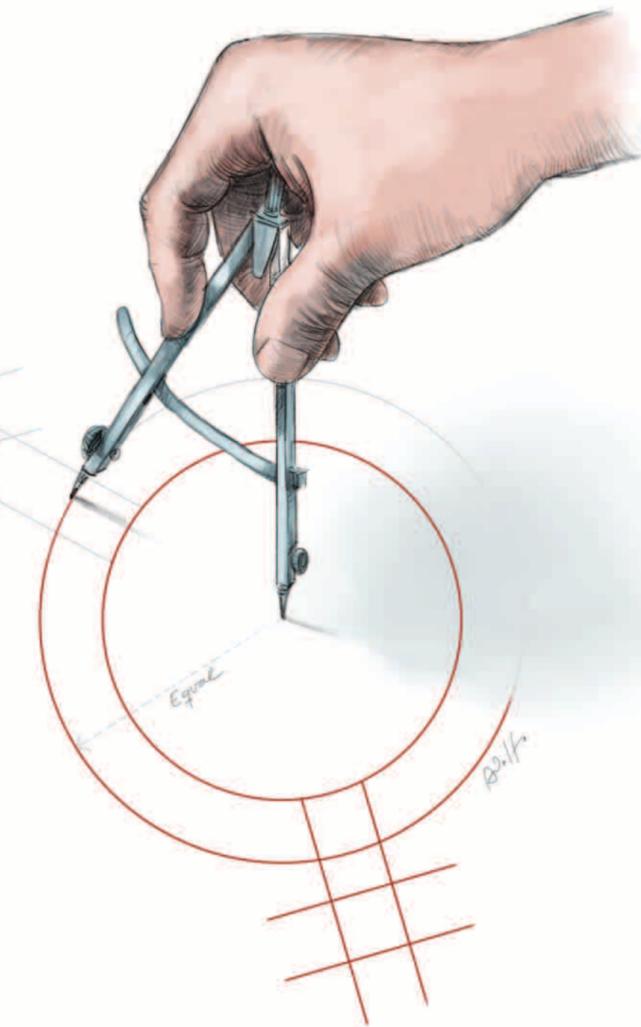
But introducing paternity or parental leave is not enough – girls and boys need to be conditioned from an early age to accept that both sexes have a role to play as earners and carers.

Too little is being done by the government to combat harmful gender stereotypes – particularly in the media and advertising. That media are easily accessed through multiple devices and by younger generations makes it even more critical that the government, parents and educators adopt measures to ensure consumers, particularly young consumers, are aware of the potentially harmful effects of news reports and images that objectify women and promote unrealistic body ideals.

Linked to this, many teenagers are growing up without essential life skills and the critical thinking required to challenge gender-based assumptions and to see new possibilities for themselves.

Gender biases explain why women continue to be under-represented in science, technology, engineering or maths and in technology jobs. Addressing this will be critical for the prospects of future generations of Hong Kong girls and, ultimately, the economy.

This is a pivotal time for Hong Kong as it stands at the twin crossroads of greater democracy and ever-growing ties with



China. It is critical that women have a seat at the table when it comes to deciding the policies that will govern and shape Hong Kong. Although there are some notable women in government and political parties who undeniably punch above their weight, women are under-represented in all levels of politics – from office bearers to voters.

The government needs to introduce initiatives to encourage the full and equal political participation of women, including helping to strengthen our political parties to make them an attractive and viable career path for women. In addition, education programmes for women on their right to vote would help balance the gender ratio among voters.

Finally, we hope the government will overhaul the Women's Commission and give it the authority and resources to ensure that all relevant data is collected and analysed by gender and fed into the design of policies, programmes and budgets that promote women's equality in Hong Kong.

Decisive action is needed on women's rights, or we risk condemning future generations of women to indebtedness, indecision and frustration.

Su-Mei Thompson is CEO of The Women's Foundation. Jo Baker is a research consultant on human rights. Lisa Moore also contributed to this article. To read the full Cedaw report, visit <http://www.thewomensfoundationhk.org/download/TWF%20CEDAW%202014.pdf>

Brutal truth

Vincent Piket says the world needs to strengthen its resolve to stamp out all forms of violence against women, which still too often go unpunished

The motto of this year's Women's Day, "Inspiring Change", underlines the fact that women and girls around the world continue to experience discrimination and violence in their everyday lives. This must change.

Discrimination and violence against women is a global scourge. Violence takes many forms, including physical, mental or sexual violence, violence based on so-called "honour", trafficking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, rape as a war tactic, unwanted sexual advances, physical contact or other forms of sexual harassment at work. In the absence of an effective remedy, acts of violence against women too often remain unpunished.

Violence against women and girls is a worldwide phenomenon, crossing all borders, all generations, all nationalities, and all communities. Yet it remains hidden, under-reported, underprosecuted and underpunished. This trend must be reversed.

According to a 2013 global review by the World Health Organisation, 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either sexual violence at the hands of someone who is not their partner, or physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, or both. The European Union, Hong Kong and Macau are not immune to the problem. Recognising this reality is the first step in addressing the problem.

Violence against women is a violation of fundamental rights. Too often still, it is wrongly perceived as a "private" issue or condoned on grounds of custom and tradition. There are also serious consequences for the health of victims, such as the spread of HIV and unwanted pregnancies.

The public interest to act is high. A 2006 Council of Europe study put the annual cost of domestic violence in the EU at €16 billion (HK\$171 billion); this includes health costs, law enforcement expenses and loss of productivity.

The experience of violence unifies women of all social backgrounds. The specific situations of vulnerable groups and individuals should be addressed, such as women and girls with disabilities, elderly women, domestic workers, migrant women and refugees, journalists and sex workers.

There is no uniform solution to addressing the problem nor to ending impunity. The European Union countries have adopted a variety of approaches, including awareness-raising campaigns, eviction orders against perpetrators, capacity training for judges and police, and strengthening the criminal, civil and administrative legal framework. Media campaigns raise public consciousness, leading to greater women's awareness of their own rights and an increase in the number of cases reported.

In Hong Kong, gender equality and protection against violence are recognised in law. Organisations such as the Women's Commission, the Equal Opportunities Commission, as well as active non-governmental organisations, civil society and private-sector firms contribute to the improvement of the conditions of women.

On women's rights, we must not be complacent. Let us strengthen our resolve and join forces with the UN secretary general's "UNITE to End Violence against Women" campaign. Our goal must be that women and girls everywhere can fully realise their right to a life free of violence – and can do so now.

Vincent Piket is head of the EU Office to Hong Kong and Macau. This article is also on behalf of all the consuls-general of the EU member states accredited to Hong Kong

From the East to the West, politicians fail the test of courage and peace

Kevin Rafferty says a resolution to the Ukrainian crisis will require sacrifice that's in short supply

Surely the prize for the most cynical news item of the week should go to the announcement from Oslo that Russian President Vladimir Putin has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Admittedly, it was for his work in proposing how to get rid of Syria's chemical weapons, but even that deal has come unstuck.

Events of the past few weeks in Ukraine have shown how fragile the state of the world is, how interdependent, and yet how badly served it is by leaders of all the biggest countries. If there were a Nobel Anti-Peace Prize, Putin might win it, but there would be too many leading contenders.

Give credit where it's due. Putin and his foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, were barefaced in denying that Russia controlled the well-drilled troops who seized control of Crimea.

But these troops are Russians. Their appearance coincided with the arrival of tens of trucks carrying teams of commandos from Russia across the Strait of Kerch.

Apologists for Putin claim the US and President Barack Obama have been guilty of worse atrocities against innocent civilians, and cite the "illegal war" against Iraq, the invasion of Afghanistan, regime change in Libya and killing of thousands of civilians in drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

Do thousands of wrongs make Putin's actions right? And if we are checking bloodstained

hands, how many Syrian civilians have died because Putin blocked UN resolutions to take aid into besieged areas?

Putin and Obama are not alone in betraying dreams of peace. China has been busy denouncing Japan for its aggressive rewriting of history while announcing a 12.2 per cent increase in military spending to 808 billion yuan (HK\$1 trillion). Even according to Beijing's figures, China's spending has

If there were a Nobel Anti-Peace Prize, Putin might win it, but there would be many contenders

repeatedly risen in the past 10 years while Japan's defence spending has remained flat.

North Korea this week fired seven missiles into the sea from its east coast without giving prior warning and, according to South Korea, a Chinese passenger aircraft passed through the rocket's trajectory seven minutes later.

Japanese politicians, meanwhile, have been conducting a verbal war against their ugly facts of history, with plans to rewrite the books, without recognising how self-defeating this is.

To go back to Ukraine, it may be stretching things to say that Ukraine is a Sarajev moment, referring to the start of the first world war when anarchist Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. Some reporters feared that such a dangerous impasse had been reached when unarmed Ukrainian soldiers faced the supposedly not-Russian soldiers on the airfield where they were supposed to work. Luckily, the shot was fired in the air.

There are awkward questions for everyone. Ukraine, meaning those in control of the government in Kiev, has to accept that Russia has reason to be concerned about the considerable numbers of Russian speakers in the country. But they point out that the dead in Independence Square came from all communities, including Russian speakers from Crimea, Armenians and Jews.

Ukrainians do not want to be split or be on the front line of a new cold war. They say that they would like to be part of Europe.

But is the European Union prepared to pay the price, even if Putin will back down? And if he won't, will the EU pay the even bigger price of helping the ailing Ukrainian economy to its feet in the face of Russian sanctions, and threatened cutbacks to gas supplies?

German Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed Putin seemed to be "in another world". But will German companies agree with her if they are deprived by

sanctions of trade and investment opportunities in Russia? Will the brave financiers of the City of London and property agents in Mayfair go along with losing the business of Russian oligarchs in support of David Cameron's hostility to Putin's demarche?

For the semi-detached Obama and his increasingly isolationist Congress and people, it should be a lesson that in a globalising world – as John Donne wrote centuries ago – any person's death diminishes me. What is at stake in Ukraine is principles of sovereignty and the future world order.

China and Japan both find themselves in the same boat. China, Russia's most reliable ally, according to Elizabeth Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations, has said a "soft 'nyet'" to Putin's intervention in Ukraine. Japan's Shinzo Abe had been cosying up to Putin. Will either – or both – dare tell Russia to back off?

For the helpless United Nations, it is another nail in the coffin of a system where any of the five victors of a former war can defy world opinion and humanity at will.

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Media, not the government, should decide what's news

What exactly is a balanced view? In my view, there is no such thing. By saying that, am I being unbalanced? What is a biased editorial? Again, no such thing. Editorials are, by nature, biased. They reflect the views of the writer or newspaper. A view can never be balanced because not everyone will share it and those who don't will say it is unbalanced.

Yet, this week, Hong Kong entered the slippery slope of letting the government define balanced views on TV and radio. What's so bizarre is that it raised no outcry even though, a week earlier, Hongkongers had united to declare media freedom sacrosanct following the savage attack on former *Ming Pao* chief editor Kevin Lau Chun-to.

A Communications Authority committee proposed that TV and radio licensees and their decision-making executives who express views through editorials or programmes must give airtime to opponents for the sake of balance. How will the authority decide if balance has been breached?

Supposing ATV airs an editorial saying Occupy Central would destroy Hong Kong. Must the station then give equal time to the organisers to say they're not hurting Hong Kong? How to decide which opinions warrant equal time? If every opinion does, wouldn't that turn TV stations into debating platforms?

It is widely known that Fox News reflects heavily the conservative views of owner Rupert Murdoch while CNN takes a liberal view. American conservative talk radio stations have no opposing views for

Michael Chugani says the proposed requirement of elusive editorial 'balance' in TV and radio programmes is unneeded interference



balance. Does the US government meddle? No. Viewers decide which station to choose.

Already, our election rules dictate that when broadcasters interview one candidate, they must interview all others in the same constituency, including fringe candidates with no hope

Editorials are, by nature, biased. They reflect the views of the writer or newspaper

of winning. Editors should decide what is news, not the government.

Some years ago, we had the ludicrous situation where broadcasters carrying reports of a candidate caught with mainland prostitutes had to publicise the names of all his election rivals for balance, even though they were not caught with prostitutes. This rule letting our government dictate how election news reports are handled was the first slide down the slippery slope. The new move to define balanced editorials represents the next

slide. What I worry most about is a third slide that would muzzle TV and radio opinion writers and hosts who are not licensees or executives. I write a freelance weekly editorial for *ATV Focus* on the Chinese channel. The station makes clear it is my view, yet receives complaints of bias. Every time that happens, I have to justify my views to the Communications Authority.

I also host an English-language show for ATV. During the 2012 Legislative Council election, I had as guests a Democratic Party member who was not a candidate and a university pollster but received complaints the show was not balanced. The election rule required me to provide phone and e-mail logs to prove I had tried to invite "balanced" guests.

I wonder what kind of media freedom we united to defend last week. Surely, it wasn't "balanced" media freedom. Legislator Claudia Mo Man-ching slammed the balanced opinion proposal for not being tough enough to counter biased editorials. She says she may oppose it in the Legislative Council. That's a bit rich coming from someone who is known for rabid attacks against those with different views, including ATV, whose licence she had demanded be cancelled.

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