

Head of Women's Foundation wants to fight gender stereotypes

Body dedicated to gender equality says it needs an overhaul as it tackles 'toxic' stereotypes

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Su-Mei Thompson (centre) and the Women's Foundation are submitting a report to the UN on how the government can tackle gender discrimination. Photo: Dickson Lee

The Women's Commission should be drastically overhauled and elevated to a similar status as the equalities watchdog so that it can tackle the "toxic" gender stereotypes taught to children, says the head of a women's group.

"From a very early age in nursery and kindergarten, girls and boys are already treated differently by teachers, who impose preconceptions about how boys are leaders, girls are followers," said Su-Mei Thompson, 47, chief executive of The Women's Foundation since 2009.

The mother of two recalled her daughter at the age of four telling her that she wanted to be a nurse because only boys could become doctors.

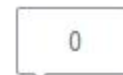
"It starts early and it gets worse during the teen years," Thompson said. "The gender piece is really missing from Hong Kong life because we don't think about education or media and how those things inform the next generation."

She pointed out two recent overseas examples of government intervention to address gender stereotypes: Taiwan's recent ban on plastic surgery for girls under 18 years old; and a plan by France to restrict the age of girls entering beauty pageants.

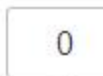
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"The fact that Taiwan and France have to do this just shows how toxic we have become, in some ways, in society," Thompson said at the Sheung Wan offices of the foundation.

"It is brave of those governments for taking on what is essentially social re-engineering. Hong Kong needs to be watching and considering because it is sitting on the sidelines a lot and being quite timorous."

A key failing by the administration was imposing restrictions on the Women's Foundation, she said.

The advisory body, set up in 2001, is grossly underfunded and lacking staff and should have its status upgraded to the same level as the Equal Opportunities Commission, Thompson said.

For instance, the Women's Commission is chaired on an honorary basis by a volunteer and the body has no permanent staff, with employees from the Labour and Welfare Bureau seconded to it on an ad-hoc basis.

"Why has the Women's Commission been created in such a half-hearted way?" asked Thompson, who was appointed to the Equal Opportunities Commission last May.

She added that the Women's Commission's HK\$30 million budget fell well below that of the Equal Opportunities Commission, which has a budget of more than HK\$100 million.

"In the short term, what we need is a review of the structure and a survey of women's organisations in Hong Kong, as to whether they feel their interests are being adequately represented. For what they are, the foundation does some reasonably good work."

That view and other ways the government could tackle gender discrimination are detailed in a new 22-page report by the foundation to be submitted to the UN's committee on the convention on eliminating discrimination against women.

Another key issue was teaching boys, at an early age, to dismantle gender stereotypes.

"Boys are very much of the mould that they provide and girls stay at home," Thompson said.

"Globally, NGOs like us are recognising this as the next big challenge because, ultimately, all the power structures are still very male-dominated. It goes through all the programmes we run: how do we make more men champions of equality?"

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as Women's Foundation head makes call for resources