

Gender equality still a distant dream

South China Morning Post

Alex Lo: alex.lo@scmp.com

Tuesday, 12 March, 2013



Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook Inc. Photo: Bloomberg

Everyone agrees on the need to promote gender equality. Yet, everywhere, it remains an elusive goal. Of course, it varies between nations and regions. In rich countries and advanced economies, the debate is often about how women can "have it all", that is, both having a family and pursuing a successful career. A new book, *Lean In*, by Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's high-profile chief operating officer, has caused an uproar by arguing just that point. But in less well-off or developing countries, it's often about basic protection for the safety and dignity of women.

Hong Kong is well on its way to achieving advanced economy status and it has undeniably made great progress on the equality front. Yet, it seems we are even behind the mainland. If a new survey by international accounting group Grant Thornton is correct, 51 per cent of senior management jobs in mainland companies are now held by women.

Compared to the private sector, the government has not done too badly in promoting women. Our civil service is run by a woman; we have had two female chief secretaries. There are not enough women ministers in the Executive Council. Nevertheless many government departments are staffed by women in senior positions. Yet, Hong Kong's private sector still lags behind.

Only one in 10 directors of listed companies are women. Forty per cent of these companies have no women on their boards and 37 per cent have just one female director. The Women's Foundation is launching the 30% Club to help promote more women onto company boards.

Despite being a modern city, some of our social attitudes are still backward. A 2011 Women's Commission survey found nearly 40 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that a

man's job is to earn money and a woman's job is to do household chores and take care of the family. Though more women join the workforce, they also tend to drop out after marriage and especially after becoming a mother.

So while we may have done much to remove overt discrimination, much needs to be done to raise barriers that are holding women back. Becoming a more family-friendly society that supports career mothers will be a good start.