

Leading women ponder the political glass ceiling

Panel discussing women's political fortunes in city draws lessons from Margaret Thatcher's career and the Communist Party

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A panel of leading local women discussed the "glass ceiling" that limits women's roles in Hong Kong politics, touching on Margaret Thatcher and even China's Communist Party last night.

"[Former British prime minister] Thatcher is a controversial figure, but the challenges she encountered in her career because she was a woman are really relevant to our conversation," said Su-Mei Thompson, director of The Women's Foundation (TWF), which organised the panel at the British Council in Admiralty.

TWF is a charity that promotes women's equality.

The panelists, who discussed ways to recruit more women into politics, included Anson Chan Fang On-sang, the first woman and first Chinese person to become chief secretary; lawmaker Tanya Chan, a founding member of the Civic Party; and Scarlett Pong Oi-lan, a district councillor from Sha Tin.

Unless woman candidates sweep the Legislative Council election in September, these women will remain the exceptions in Hong Kong.

Women comprise only 18 per cent of the city's legislature, slightly below the global average of 19 per cent but much below the figure in many developed countries – such as New Zealand, where women comprise 35 per cent of the legislature.

Addressing the topic "Iron Ladies and Glass Ceilings: Women, Politics and the Construction of Gender", the panellists discussed scenes from the



Scarlett Pong (left), Anson Chan and Tanya Chan discuss why few women have risen to the top in Hong Kong politics. Photo: Sam Tsang

film *The Iron Lady*, which portrays Thatcher's career.

One clip showed Thatcher's campaign advisers telling her to change her hairstyle, voice and general appearance so as to gain popularity.

"We think that women in Hong Kong can learn from the experiences of women politicians in other countries," said Thompson.

Anson Chan said her experiences showed the importance of involving men in bringing gender balance.

"I was instrumental in creating the Women's Commission, but I haven't seen them making much of a difference," she said. "There's so much to do.and men need to be involved. If we just talk about these issues with women, it's preaching to the choir."

And Pong recalled sexism on the campaign trail and family protests.

"When I was a newlywed, my father-in-law pressured me to stay at home and be a housewife. I had to struggle through that for several years," she said.

Hong Kong could also learn from the Chinese Communist Party about women's participation in politics, said panel moderator Professor Louise Edwards, from the University of Hong Kong's Modern China Studies programme.

"Women in the mainland held top political positions and had the right to vote long before Hong Kong women did," she said.

"I think Hong Kong's party systems need to change so they are actively supporting women's political careers, and men are actively supporting female politicians, which is what happened in China."