

For Immediate Release

NEW STUDY FROM THE WOMEN'S FOUNDATION FINDS THAT GENDER STEREOTYPING IN HONG KONG MEDIA HAS FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Hong Kong, May 11, 2015: The Women's Foundation, one of Hong Kong's leading NGOs dedicated to the advancement of women, today launched a new report on how Hong Kong media creates and exacerbates gender stereotypes.

The study which was sponsored by the Equal Opportunities Commission explores the potential associations between the portrayal of women in the media on the one hand and societal perceptions, attitudes and behaviours on the other with a focus on three important issues for Hong Kong, namely

- the increase in cases of harassment of, and violence against, women
- the increase in eating disorders and body image issues affecting women and girls
- the under-representation of women in leadership roles

The study took the form of a comprehensive literature review of over 20 years of published research in relation to exposure to various print and non-print media with a focus on 28 peer-reviewed studies in particular. To our knowledge, this is the first report to date that collates the key findings from existing local research on these important themes and provides relevant global comparisons. The study also provides a set of recommendations for government, private sectors and individuals on how to address the issues identified in the report.

Key findings include:

- **Gender stereotyping and social expectations:** Gender stereotypes are very prevalent in Hong Kong and are exacerbated for both sexes after media exposure like watching certain television programmes. Specifically, men have more entrenched stereotypical beliefs and are more prone to negatively judge different personality traits and behaviours. Meanwhile, working women feel pressure to conform to societal expectations of women as home-makers and care-givers in order to be considered successful. This may explain why Hong Kong's female workforce participation rate at 54% is lower than in many other developed economies – e.g., 71% in the UK and 67.6% in the US.
- **Body image and self-esteem:** Women who are saturated in media that idealises specific body images and perceptions, attitudes and behaviours are more likely to experience body image dissatisfaction, a lower sense of self-worth and eating disorders. This is concerning if you consider that 30% of the pages of our entertainment magazines portray slimming advertisements directed at women. In 2012, the Hong Kong Eating Disorder Association reported that eating disorders are increasing exponentially in Hong Kong with the number of individuals between the ages of 20 and 29 who are clinically underweight doubling from 1995 to 2010.
- **Limited female role models:** In the vast majority of programmes and advertisements, men are featured in roles of authority and male voices tend to be used for commentaries and voice overs whereas women tend to be depicted in domestic roles. More than other developed territories, the representation of gender-specific professions (secretaries and nurses being depicted by women for example) is still very apparent in Hong Kong media. This may have

some bearing on why despite women being more educated and more prevalent in the workforce than ever before, women continue to be under-represented on Hong Kong corporate boards and in senior management roles. Women make up just 11% of the total director pool of Hong Kong's listed issuers and comprise just 33% of senior management roles.

- **Greater permissiveness in sexual coercion and higher proclivity towards sexual harassment:** Exposing boys and girls to sexually explicit materials has harmful consequences. Boys who are exposed to pornography have more negative stereotypes of women and a greater proclivity toward sexual harassment. Girls who are exposed to pornography believe sexual coercion is more permissible in relationships. This is particularly concerning given reports estimating that 40% of Hong Kong teens aged 15 to 17 routinely access pornographic materials. Meanwhile, a recent study found that sex offenders in Hong Kong are getting younger and younger. Half of the juvenile sex offences committed in the New Territories in 2013 involved 11-14yr olds which is three times the number of cases committed by the same age group in 2009.
- **Insufficient available research:** In comparison to international literature, there is a paucity of quantitative, longitudinal research on the scope, impact and related effects of media exposure on societal attitudes and behaviours. For instance, the US has several leading organisations like the Geena Davis Institute that are tracking media exposure and its impact on society. Meanwhile, there is a substantial body of UK research on a range of issues from the effect of pornography on young consumers to the correlation between media exposure and stress and anxiety levels among girls.

According to Su-Mei Thompson, CEO of The Women's Foundation, "As a society, Hong Kong lags behind in understanding how and where negative gender stereotypes are formed and the potential correlation between media exposure and societal issues like eating disorders affecting women and girls, an increase in harassment cases against women, and the under-representation of women in policy and decision-making roles. We hope this research will encourage the Government, regulators, businesses and the media to promote greater responsibility and sensitivity when it comes to the portrayal of women and girls in the media. At the same time, we need to introduce media literacy training particularly for children and young adults so they are able to filter what they see and embrace a set of healthy and positive core values and aspirations."

Dr York Chow, Chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission, said, "Promoting gender equality and eliminating discrimination on the basis of sex, pregnancy, and marital status in Hong Kong has been an integral part of our work since our establishment nearly 20 years ago. To ensure we are able to maximise the potential of women, our society needs to further our effort on combating harmful stereotypes against women and girls – not just in terms of influencing the choice of studies and careers by women, but also changing the public attitudes and values."



About The Women's Foundation

Established in 2004, The Women's Foundation is a non-profit organisation and registered charity dedicated to the advancement of women and girls in Hong Kong through ground-breaking research, community programmes, and education and advocacy. For more information, please go to www.twfhk.org.

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