

The Women's Foundation Gala Dinner

22nd November, 2017

Keynote Address by Mrs Anson Chan, GBM, GCMG, CBE, JP

Chairman and Members of the Board of Governors, Fiona, TWF Members, Ladies & Gentlemen,

It has been my honour to be Patron of The Women's Foundation since 2012 and I am delighted to be invited to give the Keynote Address at this year's Gala Dinner. I recall that I was first introduced to the Foundation and its Mission to promote the full and equal participation of women and girls in all aspects of Hong Kong society back in 2007, when I was standing for election to the Legislative Council.

The remarkable expansion of the Foundation's services, since its establishment in 2004, is a tribute to all concerned: including sponsors, management and staff and the host of volunteers who make an invaluable contribution as mentors, teachers and activists. It was a pleasure to support Su-Mei Thompson for so many years and, under the leadership of able Boards of Governors, witness the Foundation carving out a unique role in the empowerment of women and girls in Hong Kong. I look forward to continuing to support Fiona and her team.

The title of this year's event is "Reflections on the last 20 – and next 20 - years: what progress for women's advancement?" In this 20th anniversary year of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region it is indeed timely to reflect on what has been achieved to improve the lot of women in our city and what hills remain to be climbed.

Overall, is Hong Kong a good place to be a woman? Having trawled through the results of various surveys that seek to identify the best countries in which to live, if you are a woman, I have come to the conclusion that – similar to assessments of the world's most liveable cities – rankings tend to be based on somewhat subjective criteria. Some criteria, such as access to education, equality before the law and the enjoyment of the same civil and political rights and freedoms as men are obvious. Hong Kong can safely boast that, as a society, we tick most of these boxes.

Some countries gain extra points for having a woman as head of government. But this phenomenon is not always a reflection of the overall status of women in that jurisdiction. Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, is one of the world's most respected leaders, but the numbers of women at the highest levels of corporate management in Germany remain relatively small. An amusing anecdote is that GPS systems installed in cars for the German market always have to have a male voice giving directions, because German men will not take instructions from a woman.

The Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland score very highly on many aspects, principally because they support the role of women with generous maternity benefits, first class child care and the ability to ease their way gently back into the workforce thanks to flexible arrangements that enable them to work from home or job share, while their children are still young.

These are aspects on which very little progress has been made in Hong Kong in the past 20 years. Our labour laws mandate no more than a miserly 10 weeks maternity leave at four fifths pay and have remained unchanged for the past 22 years. They are actually less generous than the statutory benefits provided on the Mainland, where women are entitled to a minimum of 14 weeks leave and a further 30 days, or longer, if they

give birth for the first time at age 24 or older. There is also a provision to allow mothers to breast feed for up to one hour during the working day.

As put succinctly in an article in the China Daily last July – and I quote:

“For new mothers living in one of the world's most expensive cities, perhaps what riles more than inadequate maternity leave is the lack of full pay. The discriminatory pay sends out a clear message that Hong Kong women must be put at a financial disadvantage if they choose to exercise their reproductive choice. For "Asia's World City", how antediluvian is that?”

Meanwhile, the Singapore Government provides 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, while India recently expanded this provision to 26 weeks, up from 12. In Canada and Norway, it's 50 weeks and 44 weeks, respectively!

In short, Hong Kong has fallen woefully behind in the provision of maternity and other benefits that support working mothers. Current policies and legal provisions are clearly at odds with the Government's wish to encourage women to have more children and arrest the sharp decline in the local birth rate over the past 30 years. Chief Executive Carrie Lam's announcement in her policy speech that the Government would be giving priority to reviewing them is therefore most welcome and long overdue. I hope the Administration will consult widely on reform measures and look to organisations like TWF to tender advice.

Hong Kong's legendary culture of long working hours also poses a particular challenge to working mothers. Despite the fact that men are taking more responsibility for sharing household chores, the burden of running the home and caring for children - and sometimes elderly relatives as well – still falls mainly on women. The Women's Commission notes that 30% of women in Hong Kong drop out of the workforce due to caring responsibilities. While enacting law to specify maximum working hours would undoubtedly offer some protection, in particular to women in low paid jobs, it will not alter the damaging culture that prevails in so many professional settings where no one wants to be seen to be the first to leave the office at the end of the day.

The need for 'work life balance' is a popular mantra, but is paid only lip service in many fields of employment. If women are to escape the vicious cycle of guilt at not spending enough time with their families, versus guilt at having at times to leave work a little earlier than some of their male colleagues, we need employers (including the Government) and employees to communicate more effectively about their respective needs and expectations and reach a common understanding on the ground rules to achieve them. For many women, flexible working is particularly important because it enables these women to juggle multiple priorities. Economies that have adopted strategies such as flexible working see benefits for both employers and employees in terms of improved efficiency, higher retention levels and better teamwork.

One of TWF's strategic goals is to challenge gender stereotypes that are at the root cause of so many constraints that women face and impose on themselves. The recent succession of shocking revelations of sexual harassment and abuse of women by men in positions of power over their employment or career prospects, is a much-needed wake-up call to women as well as men, for it would be foolish to think that Hong Kong is immune from this sort of perverted behaviour. Interestingly, what initially implicated just one top film producer in Hollywood has burst a dam of silence, in the USA and UK, and unleashed a torrent of social media 'me too' disclosures by women in other walks of life, including politics and the wider entertainment scene.

No one is stepping up to try and explain the behaviour of the men concerned – some of whom are clearly in need of psychological help; but how do we explain the reluctance of so many of their colleagues and victims to speak up? I appreciate that concerns over career prospects or fears of being vilified may make victims

hesitate to point an accusing finger. But those affected should realize that, by keeping quiet, they are helping to facilitate the cover-up and thus placing more young women at risk.

Men who indulge in “locker room talk” or are abusive towards women do it largely because they have the power and believe they can, or think they can get away with it. This culture of entitlement and impunity on the part of men will not change overnight, nor as a result of the exposure and shaming of a few high-profile individuals.

What is required is a concerted effort to educate young men to treat young women as equals and to raise awareness at all levels of society of the need for zero tolerance of sexual harassment and abuse. More also needs to be done to instill in women and girls a sense of self-worth and entitlement to be treated with respect. Women themselves have a crucial role to play in this process: as mothers of sons, as sisters of brothers, as girlfriends and wives, in their position both as subordinates and bosses in the workplace. In addition senior management and their human resources departments need to draw up and vigorously enforce robust and transparent procedures for reporting and acting upon sexual abuse cases.

There can be no doubt that the ascendancy of more women into positions of leadership and influence will be a vital prerequisite to tackling gender bias, sexism and latent misogyny. We all want to see more women in senior positions in the public and private sector, including representation on company Boards of Directors, but this should be based on merit not tokenism. Over the past 20 years women, in a highly competitive environment, have played an increasing role at senior levels in the civil service, including in bastions of male domination such as the disciplined services. Women are also moving into top positions in the corporate world, particularly in banking and financial services and the legal profession.

We now have a woman occupying the top post in the governance of Hong Kong. Her first Policy Address has been well received; I am sure her long and distinguished career in the Administrative Service of the pre and post-Handover Hong Kong Administrations has equipped her well for this challenging role. In the long run, however, the quality of her tenure of office will be measured not just by her undoubted commitment to sustaining the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong, but by her willingness to defend robustly the core values and freedoms that define our community under ‘one country, two systems’.

On a somewhat different note, it is interesting that, in recent months, attention has been focussed on the (all too often) neglected contribution of women to scientific research, discovery and invention. For example, one thing I didn’t know is that, despite the car manufacturing industry being a notoriously male preserve, a very basic but vital addition to the design of the horseless carriage, namely the windscreen wiper, was invented by a woman, Mary Anderson, in 1903.

Apart from being the 20th anniversary of the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, 2017 is the 40th anniversary of the birth of the first baby conceived through the process of in-vitro fertilisation, a breakthrough that has traditionally been credited to scientist Robert Edwards and gynaecologist Patrick Steptoe. In fact, there was a third invaluable member of the team: embryologist Jean Purdy who has received scant recognition over the years. Similarly, Rosalind Franklin was part of the team that discovered the structure of DNA but, while the names of Watson and Crick are recognised the world over, Franklin’s role has been largely under-acknowledged.

I applaud the efforts of TWF to promote the participation of girls in STEM subjects and careers in technology and innovation. It is essential that girls and young women are equipped with skills for the 21st century and for a continuing revolution in the fields of information and communications technology and other creative industries. It is also essential that they demand the recognition they deserve for their efforts and not allow their male colleagues to garner all the kudos.

Equality of opportunity is fundamental. Having said this, I personally don't subscribe to the thesis that, unless women match men toe for toe in terms of participation in all career streams, we have somehow failed to empower them sufficiently. It is natural that women will continue to be drawn in larger numbers than men to professions that involve care and nurturing, for example in the fields of education, the social services and health care. One of the keys to advancement of women in the next 20 years will be a better understanding, by both genders, of how we can best complement each other's strengths and competencies for the greater good of whatever career we have chosen.

As embodied in TWF's defining Vision, our overall goal for the next 20 years must be to continue to build a Hong Kong in which women and girls have the opportunity, support and resources to thrive and achieve their true potential. We must continue to drive home the message that building a more diverse workforce is not just a moral and ethical imperative but it is also a business priority because such companies simply perform better.

In Hong Kong, I think we need, in particular, to reach out to women and girls in our ethnic minority communities who, through an inability to master enough Chinese to obtain higher education, or out and out racism, all too often find themselves limited to poorly paid menial jobs and unable to break out of the cycle of inter-generational poverty. Hong Kong has thrived on its reputation as a culturally diverse, cosmopolitan city but, in truth, many women from non-Chinese minorities struggle to fulfil their potential. As a society we need to embrace and nurture our diversity and ensure it is not vulnerable to being marginalised,

Once again, it is a pleasure to be here this evening. I look forward, as always, to the contribution of other speakers, and to sharing with you the energy, dynamism and commitment to the future advancement of women in Hong Kong that is the hallmark of everything that TWF stands for.

Thank you.