

# Closing the Gender Gap in Hong Kong: Conversations With The Community

## Executive Summary



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“The Women’s Foundation’s studies and follow-up involve a collaborative effort. This opportunity for the Hong Kong community to come together to fuel positive change was an opportunity we did not want to miss.”

—*Matthew Fremont-Smith, Managing Director, Goldman Sachs (lead sponsor, Stakeholder Engagement Project)*



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Copies of this Executive Summary and the full Stakeholder Engagement Report are posted on our website in pdf format.

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## **Mission**

The Women's Foundation promotes the full participation of women and girls in all aspects of Hong Kong society by building resources to support change through research, education, public awareness and programmes.

## **Strategic Goals**

### ***Goal 1 (Programme/Grantmaking)***

Lead change through collaboration and make grants that are targeted by research, evaluated for impact, and build economic self-reliance for women and girls.

### ***Goal 2 (Research/Communications)***

Define and communicate the status, issues and solutions for women and girls and establish TWF as a leading voice in the community.

### ***Goal 3 (Resource Development)***

Increase funding for Hong Kong women and girls by fundraising to ensure longterm financial support of our mission and strategic plan.

### ***Goal 4 (Organisational Development/Finance)***

Strengthen our impact by developing the infrastructure and leadership necessary to support effective implementation of the strategic plan.

## **Programme Focus**

### ***Women's Economic Self-Reliance***

with special emphasis on:

#### ***Girls***

Empower girls with skills to become economically self-reliant, successful leaders of the future.

#### ***Women in Leadership***

Increase women's roles in decision-making processes.

#### ***Women in Poverty***

Create pathways to long-term financial independence and economic security.

# Closing the Gender Gap

## Introduction

Since TWF was founded, we have been working to establish, literally and figuratively, a foundation from which we could launch research-based, community-based initiatives that would bring a fresh wind of change and opportunity to women and girls in Hong Kong.

Our slogan tells our story well: Research—Collaborate—Change. This is the blueprint we have used from our inception to fulfil our mission and achieve our goals. We began with Research—a two year project funded by our own Board members, to establish a benchmark for where women and girls stand today in Hong Kong. The result was *The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong 2006*, released at a Symposium and Community Forum in March 2006, the first of our many collaborative stakeholder events. Participant feedback at that event led us to conclude that women’s economic self-reliance is the critical keystone to achieving the change we want to see: women’s full participation in society.

To that end, under the umbrella of Women’s Economic Self-reliance, TWF decided to focus our attention on three intertwined areas of women’s lives in Hong Kong:

1. Girls: Empower girls with skills to become economically self-reliant, successful leaders of the future.
2. Women in Leadership: Increase women’s roles in decision-making processes.
3. Women in Poverty: Create pathways to long-term financial independence and economic security.

What followed was an eighteen-month qualitative engagement process consisting of focus groups, individual interviews and public events focusing on each of the three priority areas. We undertook this effort as a way to understand the barriers that face women and girls in Hong Kong, and we sought recommendations on how to overcome them, with a special focus on root causes and long-term solutions. We have demonstrated in this process that enormous gaps remain between the realities for women and girls in Hong Kong and the promise of what could be. These gaps cannot be closed without a community-wide effort to stamp out the gender-based biases which stand in the way of full opportunity for over one-half of our region’s citizens.

“Adopting an evidence-based approach to developing policies and practices can help decision-makers to put down their own assumptions that may be grounded in bias and not fact. . . Attitudes and social conditions also change constantly; what may be accurate today may no longer be tomorrow.”

—Christine Loh, CEO and Founder, Civic Exchange

This Executive Summary gives a brief look at the richness of the full report on these “conversations with the community” starting with the initial symposium and including the ensuing discussions in the three focus areas. While the full report offers a complete accounting of the two-year stakeholder process including the background research, a description of the stakeholder process itself and a thorough summary of participants’ suggestions for change, this Executive Summary concentrates on the last component—concrete suggestions for change in TWF’s focus areas. These suggestions have been tightly summarised here, and we encourage you to read the full report where stakeholder suggestions are more richly detailed.

One common thread among all the stakeholder events was an urgent call for more research. Research-based action is at our core, and we are committed to ongoing research that will inform our actions and those of others in the community who wish to collaborate with us.

This report is as much about the future as it is about what has already been accomplished. Change is never easy. It takes bold leaders, innovative ideas, strong alliances and significant resources. The participants in our stakeholder process came to the table with a sense of purpose, a depth of knowledge and a level of enthusiasm that we must maintain if we are to create economic opportunity, to help girls achieve their promise and to realise gender equity in decision-making processes. With a solid Research base, TWF looks forward to Collaboration which will open all doors to all citizens and create the Change that will sustain Hong Kong throughout this new century and beyond.

# The Community Considers the Research

## Public Symposium and Stakeholder Engagement Forum—The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong, 4 March 2006

In March 2006, The Women's Foundation held a Public Symposium and Stakeholder Engagement Forum to set the stage for an eighteen-month stakeholder engagement project, "Conversations with the Community". The Symposium/Forum began with a presentation of the key findings of our benchmark study, *The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong 2006* (hereafter referred to as the *Status Report*). Subsequent small-group discussions at the forum kicked off the collaboration phase of our work—and the community spoke loudly and clearly about what priorities they asked TWF to follow to achieve sustainable, positive change for Hong Kong's women and girls.

### Research

The *Status Report* was a review of extant research in Hong Kong concerning women and girls, as a first step to determining the work needed for a more comprehensive review. The *Status Report* collected and synthesised research conducted during the period 1999-2004 in sixteen topic areas based on those defined by The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The Symposium presentation focused on the most disturbing findings in the *Status Report*. The research showed large gaps in leadership roles for women, persistent and worrisome stereotyping in education, and a feminisation of poverty that is increasingly leaving many women at the bottom of the economic system—paving the way for yet another generation of poor elderly women. As a part of the presentation, the data were examined in a global context, arguing that Hong Kong would have to make better use of its female human resources in order to compete successfully in the global economy. In today's world and economy, the status of women and girls is not an issue just for women and girls, but for Hong Kong as a whole.

"Research is not just about collecting statistics. We need to know what to collect, how to compile and analyse it, and then use it to understand causal factors. Another challenge is to appreciate the multidisciplinary nature of policy-making. In real life, everything impacts on everything else. It is not easy to develop the skills to make sense of a variety of disciplines and then to consider what may be effective to address a certain condition. Only after that are we ready to explore the options for policy approaches and practices that will further equality so that we can create a more just and enriching life for the people."

— Christine Loh

“This symposium had a very different profile from most meetings on women in Hong Kong, as it included a wide range of women, including not only women working at grassroots level, but also businesswomen, local Chinese women and expatriates. This is a good thing, as it expands concern for women’s issues into a wider audience.”

—Judith Mackay, former Women’s Commission member

The negative effects of gender stereotyping—a universal and relentless view of women and girls as inferior, limited and incomplete—was a continual theme underpinning all of the findings. Likewise, the findings showed a significant lack of research on root causes of problems, thus leaving an enormous information gap for those of us who are attempting to devise and fund solutions.

TWF believes that the true conclusion to be drawn from the *Status Report* is that we in Hong Kong need fundamental change in at least four ways:

1. We must convince the community at large that improving the lives of women and girls will benefit the society as a whole.
2. We must encourage more leadership from women. Political leadership is especially important, but we also need more women leaders in business, academics, philanthropy and religion. This may take time, and we may find that not all women leaders advocate for political, economic and social equality for women. But women leaders will bring women’s views to the fore.
3. Women’s issues cannot be the sole province of women. We must find a way to engage men in this endeavour, and to help them understand that women’s issues are not just issues for women.
4. We must build on the work discussed in the *Status Report* to continually learn about women and girls and our community, and to ask meaningful and difficult questions about what is needed.

The *Status Report* and the Symposium presentation are posted in English and Chinese in the Research section of our website, [www.thewomensfoundationhk.org](http://www.thewomensfoundationhk.org).

## Collaborate

### Public Symposium and Stakeholder Engagement Forum on the Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong, 4 March 2006

#### Stakeholder Event Goals

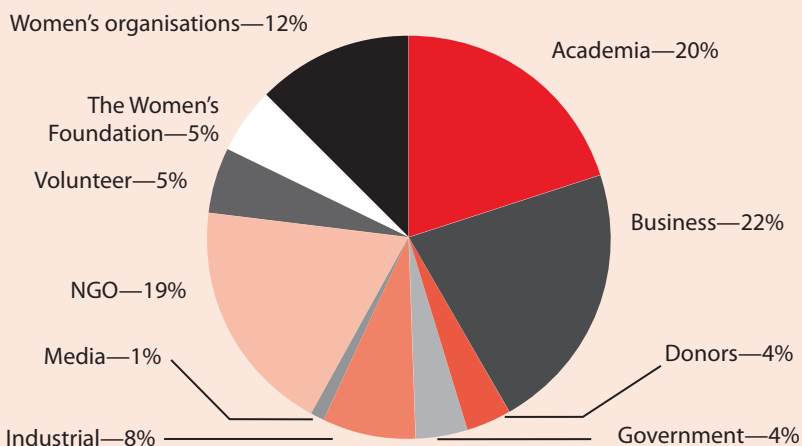
- Share key findings from TWF’s benchmark research, *The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong 2006*.
- Convene community stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the issues facing women and girls in Hong Kong.
- Engage stakeholders in discussions of priority areas and actionable ideas to effect positive change.

#### Symposium Format

The forum began with a plenary session featuring remarks by Matt Fremont-Smith of Goldman Sachs, the event sponsor. Alicia Kershaw, TWF Co-Founder, presented key findings from TWF’s benchmark research, *The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong 2006* ( summarised briefly above). Participants then



### Attendees by Sector



divided into ten small group discussions, some held in English and some in Cantonese. Facilitators led the small groups in three tasks: 1) identifying and prioritising the problems facing women and girls in Hong Kong, 2) identifying barriers to solving these problems and 3) offering specific potential solutions. All participants re-convened in a final plenary, in which a representative from each of the ten break-out groups reported their findings. The event ended with a distillation of the findings into a “Top Five” list of priorities for action by The Women’s Foundation and by the community-at-large.

## Change

Barriers and Solutions Participants were asked not only to identify problems facing women and girls in Hong Kong, but to offer insights on their root causes, barriers to change and ideas for solutions. We summarise below the views expressed.

### Problem: Gender Stereotyping and Women’s Self-Perception

#### **Barriers:**

- Deep cultural bias and lack of awareness resulting in no consensus for change
- Cultural pressure not to challenge the system
- Lack of multiple, different voices motivated to change lives of women
- Inculcation of stereotyped roles resulting in women’s self-imposed limitations
- Media-reinforced stereotypes

#### **Solutions:**

- Promotion of diversity through education reform, early education, parent education and community education
- Businesses insisting on gender fairness in the workplace and in social welfare activities
- Media sensitivity
- Women’s groups working together
- Involvement of men and grassroots organisations
- Mentoring programmes

### The Top Five Priorities of the Symposium Participants

1. ***Fighting negative perceptions and stereotypes of women and girls***  
We included in this category suggestions related to awareness and education within families, as well as in schools, the community and the media.
2. ***The need for more research***  
Participants called for more research and also wanted to see more public education about the research.
3. ***Improved employment for women***  
Participants focused on both corporate and government policies to improve women's participation in the workforce.
4. ***Increased women's leadership and "capacity building" (organisational development)***  
There was widespread recognition of the need to build stronger women leaders and gender sensitive organisations in all sectors (corporate, NGO and Government).
5. ***Allocation of more institutional resources toward issues of importance to women***  
Violence against women (family abuse and personal security) was the top issue participants saw as under-resourced. Participants citing this priority spoke of the need for increased legal protections and visibility campaigns.

### Problem: Lack of Research

#### **Barriers:**

- Lack of resources
- Lack of disaggregation of data by gender

#### **Solutions:**

- Policies to promote research with gender lens
- More equitable allocation of research money
- Research findings followed up with demands for accountability
- Require disaggregation of data by gender for any publicly-funded research
- Research followed up with campaigns to share the findings, show the inadequacies and build awareness to fight stereotypes

### Problem: Women leaving the workforce

#### **Barriers:**

- Lack of research
- Few women leaders to serve as role models
- Lack of effective government and business policies

#### **Solutions:**

- Considering alternative models for employees (such as flex-time and part-time work) and broadening awareness in the community-at-large of those alternative models
- Educating employers on how to make flexible work arrangements
- Educating managers to recognise valuable skills of women, appre-

ciate women's leadership styles and train and promote women

- Family-friendly workplace policies which give parents enough time with their families
- Better early child care and better maternity leave
- Offer of maternity benefits
- Encouraging formal and informal women's networks
- Mentoring programmes
- More legal protections and law enforcement; more support for women who want to file lawsuits for workplace discrimination
- Re-entry programmes and retraining assistance

## **Problem: Poverty**

### **Barriers:**

- Gender inequality
- Lack of enforcement of protective laws
- Stereotypical assignment of burdens of child care to women in formulating anti-poverty policies

### **Solutions:**

- Better enforcement of laws that protect single women
- Incentives to help women get in and stay in workforce
- Media campaign to raise awareness
- Fighting stigma
- Working with girls to break the cycle of generational poverty

## **Problem: Gender Stereotypes in Education**

### **Barriers:**

- A system that generates and reinforces stereotypes and can influence girls' choices of fields of study and women's choices of jobs later on
- Cultural assumptions
- Socialisation within peer groups
- Lack of political will on the government's part

### **Solutions:**

- Parent education
- Giving children options at home and in school
- Accepting differences
- Government leadership
- Educating policy makers and educators
- Life-long learning approach

## **Problem: Lack of female leadership**

### **Barriers:**

- Lack of political will by government and those in power
- Lack of awareness of need for more women leaders
- Few role models of women leaders
- Underdeveloped democracy

"What stood out to us was the broad-based nature of The Women's Foundation's study. They recognised early on that simply focusing on the problem would not be sufficient to generate positive change. Instead, they are looking at the roots of the issues...and the different social barriers that contribute ultimately to a lack of representative leadership in our community. They also bring in the commercial significance for Hong Kong of getting this right, which is something that is of equal interest to all of us."

—Matthew Fremont-Smith,  
Goldman Sachs (sponsor)

**Solutions:**

- Encouraging more women to enter politics
- Encouraging business to support women leaders
- Mentoring programmes

Note that the solutions suggested involve all aspects of the community—government, business, parents, schools, the media and women and girls themselves. The common themes include increased education, awareness, mentoring, and legal protections. Key to it all is fighting the limiting stereotypes that circumscribe the lives of women and girls.

## Conclusion

The Symposium and Stakeholder Forum provided TWF and the community with much-needed guidance for future planning. The “Top Five” priorities and the added feedback from group reports, plus individual written feedback formed the basis for strategic planning discussion by the TWF Board.

### Next steps for TWF

We at TWF see the first two priorities—fighting stereotypes and increased awareness through research—as important pathways to achieving the three other priorities: economic security, leadership and more resources for specific concerns.

TWF determined that an overall focus on economic self-reliance would enable us to help women find stronger economic security. From this stronger position, women would be more capable of taking on roles that break through the stereotyping that was the number one concern of the attendees. Under the umbrella of Women’s Economic Self-reliance, TWF will focus our efforts in three main areas, each of which takes up a priority challenge identified at the Symposium:

1. **Girls:** Empower girls with skills to become economically self-reliant, successful leaders of the future.
2. **Women in Leadership:** Increase women’s roles in decision-making processes.
3. **Women in Poverty:** Create pathways to long-term financial independence and economic security.

Our work then will seek ways to build economic self-reliance through research, awareness and programmes that build economic and leadership skills. This might include solutions suggested by the symposium participants: awareness campaigns on how women-friendly work policies help the bottom line, how men need time to be good parents too, or on the hidden abilities of women in the workforce; as well as more direct efforts to mentor, train and promote women and girls in the workforce and in financial literacy. But to get more specific guidance, following the Symposium and Stakeholder Forum, TWF made a commitment to a thorough discussion with the widest possible community representation on these three focus areas. The remainder of this report discusses the results of our “Conversations with the Community”.

# Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Women and Girls in Hong Kong

Despite its reputation as one of the world's wealthiest cities, one in five people in Hong Kong still lives in relative poverty. Although the ills of poverty are devastating to both men and women, the rigidity of socially ascribed gender roles and women's limited access to power, education and other important resources makes them particularly susceptible to poverty. As such, women are more likely to be in poverty than men, they are paid less for doing the same job as men and poverty among women has risen much faster than among men in the last decade globally.

"There is now overwhelming evidence that women's [and girls'] empowerment and economic development has the most far reaching effect in improving the lives of all... men, women and children."

—Professor Amartya Sen,  
Nobel Laureate and Economist

To understand the root causes of the escalating problem of female poverty in Hong Kong and to start finding and discussing solutions to the problem, The Women's Foundation convened sixty community leaders from a cross-section of Hong Kong's public and private sectors to share insights and identify actionable solutions to address feminisation of poverty. Through our dialogues with these key stakeholders, we recognised that the process of helping women in poverty move to a sustainable livelihood would be complicated and wrought with significant barriers, but success is possible if a holistic, coordinated and long-term approach were to be embraced.

## Research

In addition to findings in the *Status Report*, recent statistics from government agencies and academic research institutions capture the nature and scope of the feminisation of poverty in Hong Kong.

### Defining Poverty

Because different governments and organisations use different standards to measure poverty, it is essential to put poverty and the feminisation of poverty in a local context. Since there is no consensus on the definition of poverty in Hong Kong, we have used the concept of "relative poverty" as the poverty benchmark throughout this report. According to the UN and the OECD, relative poverty is defined by households that earn less than 50% of the median income of households of the same size. The most recent census data, released in 2006, state that relative poverty in Hong Kong means a monthly income of less than HK\$7,000 for a two-person household and HK\$11,850 for a four-person household.

“Women are the caregivers. This reality complicates every aspect of their lives.”

—Wu Meilin, HK Women Workers Association

## Feminisation of Poverty in Hong Kong

The link between gender and poverty has been observed worldwide. Since 1978, when Diana Pearce originally introduced the concept of “the feminisation of poverty” to describe the phenomenon that female-headed households in the United States were much more likely to experience poverty than were other types of family structures, many studies around the world have consistently found a similar pattern.

Hong Kong, the 38th largest economy in the world and with a population of only seven million, is often regarded as one of the richest regions in the world. However, with an increasingly widened income gap between the rich and the poor, poverty is a serious social issue faced by Hong Kong people and the government. The Hong Kong Council of Social Service reports that the number of females living in poverty increased from 485,000 in 1996 to 621,000 in 2000, and to 643,000 in 2005. This 33% increase occurred during a period when the total population in Hong Kong increased by only 25%.

### Causes of Female Poverty

A report by the Hong Kong Legislative Council and our own stakeholder process identified six specific causes to women’s poverty in Hong Kong:

- Gender division of labour (women in low paying jobs and occupations)
- Widening income gap between men and women
- Intra-household inequality between men and women
- Social exclusion
- Lack of gender-specific anti-poverty policies and a lack of women’s voices in the public sphere as well as in decision-making
- Flawed immigration policy.

## Collaborate

To identify the root causes of and to seek long-term solutions for female poverty in Hong Kong, TWF initiated a multi-stakeholder engagement process involving a series of dialogues with more than fifty local opinion leaders, experts, service providers and service recipients to impart knowledge, share insights and identify actionable solutions to address feminisation of poverty in Hong Kong.

### Interviews and Focus Groups

A series of interviews and focus groups were conducted in November and December 2006. We targeted opinion leaders, government representatives, and academics to seek their views on and knowledge about female poverty in Hong Kong. Specifically, these interviews and focus groups had the following goals:

- Uncover the key issues of women in poverty in order to inform TWF’s development of specific research and programme initiatives for breaking the cycle of poverty for women in Hong Kong and working toward economic self-reliance for women in mid-life

- Identify the stakeholders in a discussion about poverty in Hong Kong
- Identify other individuals and organisations/institutions dedicated to effecting change in this area
- Confirm or refute TWF research on poverty and identify other current research
- Advise TWF in shaping a larger stakeholder engagement forum in March 2007 where solutions would be proposed and evaluated.

### **Poverty Stakeholder Forum, 3 March 2007**

To follow-up with key issues identified in the interviews and focus group discussions, a large scale stakeholder event was organised on 7 March 2007. We convened over sixty community leaders from a cross-section of Hong Kong's public and private sectors at this event to begin to identify the primary reasons that cause increasing numbers of women to fall into poverty, identify the barriers to economic self-reliance, and identify strategic, collaborative solutions which address the root causes of female poverty.

#### **Poverty Forum Goals:**

- Stimulate community dialogue and collaboration to promote women's economic self-reliance in Hong Kong
- Present recent research on aspects of women's poverty in Hong Kong
- Collectively explore key issues relating to women's poverty in Hong Kong
- Present a possible framework for holistically addressing poverty in Hong Kong
- Collectively advise TWF in shaping future programme and research initiatives in the area of women's poverty.

## **Change**

The forum confirmed that the feminisation of poverty is a real and urgent issue to be faced by Hong Kong society as a whole. There was a consensus that changes and long-term remedies must be taken to break the vicious cycle of female poverty in Hong Kong. The following is a synthesis of comments and recommendations generated from our dialogues with TWF's stakeholders, reported in more detail in the full report.

#### ***Expand income and assets for poor women and low-wage workers so that they can achieve a sustainable livelihood***

- Access to asset-building opportunities for low-income Hong Kong women on CSSA so that they are able to work toward long-term and sustainable earning power, such as access to credit via savings accounts for education and loans for starting small businesses.
- Full legal protection of employment rights including part-time worker protection and benefits, implementation of a minimum wage (especially in certain sectors) and enforcing maximum working hours.
- Financial literacy training, education on how to set up savings accounts, education on accessing credit and debt management, as well as knowledge in investment and wealth management regardless of the size of household budget.

- Support to low-income women to start individual and cooperative micro and small enterprises.
- Compensation for women in the role of unpaid care-givers.
- Tackle the need for better infrastructure such as access to housing and transportation.

***Identify areas of economic growth and prepare women to play a strong role in those sectors***

- Training programmes to enhance skills and knowledge, and training in fields that are likely to grow in Hong Kong.
- Improved access to adult education and vocational training.
- Job placement and retention support.

***Increase access to social support networks and personal development to support participation in the economy***

- Opportunities to develop leadership skills, self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Personal development support such as self-assessments that identify and acknowledge skills that could be transferred to income-generating activities.
- Assistance in developing social support networks.

***Expand affordable, high-quality child care for low-income working mothers***

- Addressing the shortage of child care or elder care spaces.
- Extending opening hours of child care centres.

***Define and set an economic self-sufficiency standard in Hong Kong and institute protections to tackle unfair labour practices***

- Hong Kong should set an official poverty line for data collection purposes and to allow for more targeted public policies and social service initiatives. Even better, a defined self-sufficiency standard would identify the level of income, resources and support necessary for a family to thrive and have a sustainable livelihood.
- Government policy and incentives should encourage the private and public sector to promote family friendly workplace policies and address the problem of wage disparities based on gender.

***Break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by providing more opportunities for disadvantaged girls and youth to achieve financial independence***

- Improved quality of education and increased access to enrichment activities such as art, music, and sports.
- Improved access to high quality Chinese and English language instruction and curriculum for new immigrant and ethnic minority children.
- More widely available funding schemes in the form of loans and grants to youth from low-income backgrounds to pursue university studies.

***Take a holistic, multi-sector approach to creating pathways to economic self-reliance***

- Resources and support to help women not only “develop capabilities” but also “possess the power” to get and keep jobs, accumulate



financial and personal assets, integrate into society and successfully access pathways out of poverty.

- Concurrently address the interconnected factors that either prohibit or foster women's pathways out of poverty.
- Further linkages between the public, NGOs and the private sector.

### ***Conduct more gender-specific research on poverty***

- Strong advocacy to government for data collection with a gender lens.
- Civil societies and NGOs performing in-depth surveys and qualitative research to establish a database on women and poverty.
- Research to gauge grassroots responses and the effectiveness of existing programmes.

“Poverty needs a practical approach. Everyone wants to stand on their own two feet. We must not show disrespect to the poor. A minimum wage would solve half the problems. The rest can come through cross-sector collaboration. We are exploiting women's role in creating the social fabric.”

—Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung,  
Legislative Councillor

## **Conclusion**

Women's transitions from poverty to sustainable livelihoods is complicated and wrought with significant barriers. But TWF believes, and it has been shown elsewhere, that success is possible when a comprehensive approach is embraced. Hong Kong's low income women would be well-served by a holistic, coordinated and long-term approach that recognises women's existing resources, the broader forces at work that both strengthen and undermine their ability to be economically self-reliant, and effective strategies for building the multiple assets required to move out of poverty. A comprehensive approach would require organisations and government agencies to work together while being clear about their role and scope of expertise. They need to collaborate with other complementary organisations, building referral networks and alliances to build a better future for women striving to move out of poverty and create life-long economic security. The Women's Foundation can serve an important research role and can be a collaborative partner in these holistic solutions.

# Tapping the Leadership Potential of Women and Girls

In our conversations with the community, one message has come through loud and clear: the potential of Hong Kong women as leaders has been squandered. Both our initial *Status Report* and the March 2006 Symposium and Stakeholder Forum concluded that women in Hong Kong lack an effective and representative voice in community affairs, including women's affairs, and to rectify that lack, women leaders must be encouraged and cultivated. We see the development of effective women leaders in all aspects of society as key to achieving economic self-reliance for women and girls.

Our discussions with prominent women in Hong Kong revealed a rich and complex picture. While recognising that great strides have been made, they are painfully aware that much, much more must be done to reap the potential of women leaders. Women spoke frankly of sacrifices made and of fears that professional success would come only at the cost of family life. They chafed at the strict gender roles they were forced to navigate and yearned for more recognition of the range of skills and leadership styles that women can offer. True leaders, they spoke extensively of the need to spend more time with girls to help them become future leaders. Most importantly, they offered many concrete suggestions on how to bring about the changes needed.

From our inception, The Women's Foundation has made a stand for a collaborative approach, and our women leaders' thoughts firmly endorsed the need for all segments of the Hong Kong community to address the leadership gap for women. Their ideas make it clear

## Hong Kong Leadership Statistics<sup>1</sup>

Profession	Women	Men
Legislative Council	18%	82%
District Council	17%	83%
Employed Persons	44%	56%
Managers & Administrators	26%	74%
Junior Counsel	25%	75%
Senior Counsel	7%	93%
Doctors	25%	75%
Doctors in Consultant Rank	5%	95%
Solicitors	40%	60%
Barristers	23%	77%
Professors	8%	92%
Heads of Church	20%	80%
Pastors	18%	82%

that we must address stereotyping and rigid gender role modelling in education and in the family, we need government and business to actively support diversity and family friendly work policies, we need academic and independent research on women's leadership, and we need women to reach down to the coming generations and mentor them. The Women's Foundation will take up the challenge—and we ask that the rest of community step up too.

## Research

See table below opposite. More recent data shows that the gender gap is shrinking very slowly. At the current rate it will be generations before women achieve parity.

## Collaborate

### **The Power and Potential of Women's Leadership in Hong Kong, 28 February 2007 Sponsored by Goldman Sachs**

The Women's Foundation convened thirty-two female leaders who have reached the very top of their fields in a cross-section of Hong Kong's public and private sectors. These women leaders shared recommendations for concrete strategies to achieve more equitable representation in decision-making at all levels in Hong Kong.

#### **Stakeholder Event Goals**

- Celebrate successful women.
- Convene women leaders to understand the issues facing them.
- Seek actionable ideas to effect positive change.

#### **Session Format**

After remarks by the keynote speaker and a presentation of major research findings about women in leadership (see *Status Report*), participants divided into small groups to discuss the under-representation of women in decision-making roles: the root causes, the barriers and potential solutions. Points from these sessions were presented to the full group in a summary by the moderator.

We asked women leaders to address the questions of why women hold only a fraction of the positions of power and influence. How do we develop more girls and young women to be the leaders of tomorrow? Participants were asked to identify the primary barriers women face to achieving leadership in the workplace and in the political arena. What are some factors that do or might help women achieve their full potential? We also asked for actionable suggestions on how to effect positive change in the level of women's leadership in Hong Kong.

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1. Based on 2000-2004 data reported in *The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong 2006*, pp 40-46.

## Change

A number of ideas for positive change were put forth by women leaders in Hong Kong, which we have grouped into four strategic areas: fighting stereotypes; sponsoring research; mentoring by women; and encouraging diversity and family friendly policies in government and business. We report these suggestions below.

“Engage men in the dialogue!”  
—Leadership Stakeholder  
participant

### **Fight stereotyping that limits individual choices**

#### ***Raise strong girls through public education and awareness campaigns***

- Participants urged that both mothers and fathers must be encouraged to educate their children about gender issues and offer opportunities for both sons and daughters to express opinions, choose their own educational path, and develop their unique skills, talents, and their own identity.
- In our focus on girls we must take care to remember boys. There are very few strategies in place in our society for boys to learn to share, be a primary caretaker and respond to women’s emotions or style.

### ***Encourage an education system that creates equal opportunity for all students***

- Many participants observed the disparity between the high proportion of women teachers in primary and secondary schools and the low proportion in higher education.
- Many suggestions urged change in the delivery of education, for example, encouraging and supporting teacher training regarding gender stereotyping. The complete removal of gender stereotypes in all classroom materials would be an important step.
- While education is a government function, participants saw many roles for individuals. And because the school curriculum leaves little room for gender education because so many subjects compete for limited time, they saw the need for programmes outside of the school day.
- Higher education also received attention, such as a proposal to encourage universities to seek gender balance in their student bodies.

### ***Work with the media to engage the public and promote a more balanced view of women***

- Many comments suggested harnessing the power of the media as a positive force, for example by engaging media partners to create a ripple effect of increased public awareness about the realities of women’s lives and by encouraging the mass media to change reporting and outlook.
- Practical suggestion included putting more women on television and radio and in print, both those reporting the news and those being covered by the news.
- The community should hold the media accountable for accurate and fair reporting and keep track of them in report cards.

## **Sponsor and advocate for research supporting the advancement of women**

- There was clear consensus that much more research is needed, and impediments to this goal include systemic problems.
- The Women's Foundation, the government and the Women's Commission can work together to encourage progress in data collection.
- Specific research projects included case studies of the development of women in the workplace.
- Research is not broadly disseminated, and the news media tend to misrepresent and sensationalise research that is publicised. Therefore a strong voice is needed to market and explain research.

## **Mentor and provide role models for girls and boys**

- Participants understand well their ability to influence and support girls, and to provide role models for both girls and boys. They suggested a variety of mentoring programmes that would present female role models to male and female students.
- Participants noted that programmes must be well designed to understand the young today and engage them in planning for their futures.
- At the same time, women recognised that mentoring would be a challenge. They noted that women overburdened by work and family have little time for others. Moreover, they felt that women might lack the self-confidence and power to effectively mentor, as women often discount their own achievements. And, sad but true, they acknowledged that some women leaders feel they will compromise their achievements if they stand up for other women.

## **Encourage diversity and family friendly policies in government and business**

### ***Encourage government to take a greater role in promoting gender equality***

- Our participants see that government has a large role to play as a role model and incentive mechanism for gender equality: create models and vehicles for change, adopt legislation and hold our leadership accountable.
- Law changes are needed, and participants suggested advocacy at the legislative level to improve the work environment for women, such as the five-day work week.
- While some noted that quotas or any special measure to eradicate historical inequities are controversial within the Hong Kong community, others felt that Hong Kong should consider policies such as a quota system, used in many other countries, to ensure that women (and others) have fair representation in decision-making processes.

### ***Press business to expand opportunities for women***

- Women leaders feel that change can start with the corporate sector to promote the normative expectation that work and family can be mutually integrated and do not have to be conflicting.

“There is confusion between debate and conflict in this non-confrontational culture.”  
—Leadership Stakeholder participant

- Consistent with the conclusions of the *Status Report*, women emphasised the need to find a way to engage men who hold leadership positions, particularly at the top level of corporations, to help them recognise the value of diversity.
- Additional suggestions involve training individuals to be more supportive and women to be more outspoken.
- Tapping deeper into the stereotypes problem, leadership needs to be redefined and perceptions about what constitutes community leadership need to be changed.

### ***Raise awareness and public support for opportunities for women***

- Women leaders clearly see the political connection and asked that we press for increased female representation in appointed and elected positions. They suggested engaging the political parties in dialogue about leadership training/workshops/programmes to prepare women to enter politics.

## **Conclusion**

The good news is that our discussions with prominent women in Hong Kong produced very concrete ideas about what must be done across a broad spectrum of our community. Women leaders see the Leadership Gap closing if we address stereotyping and rigid gender role modeling in education and in the family; if government and business actively support diversity in politics, government and the workplace, as well as family friendly work policies; if our efforts are supported by more and better academic and independent research on women leaders and leadership; and if more women to reach down to the coming generations and mentor them.

TWF has taken up the challenge. We have begun by collecting and disseminating research about women and girls in Hong Kong, and convening women leaders to discuss what must be done. Next, we have taken a concrete first step—requesting grant proposals for programmes that support mentoring. As our participants told us, women have internalised the cultural biases against women leaders, and mentoring and support can help them overcome their own lack of confidence. We also believe that in acting as mentors, women can come to recognise their own strengths.

Over the next year to eighteen months, we plan to build a long-term strategic grantmaking programme that builds women leaders. We will work with women's groups, business and government to develop specific strategic initiatives.

We intend that as we work and raise awareness of the challenges to women leaders and the need to close the leadership gap, others will join in. The education system needs work, the government has a role to play, the legislature can take concrete steps and the academy can point the way for all of us with research and idea building. Business can lead by example and make the case for diversity as a plus for the bottom line. Most of all, women must continue to stand up and speak to Hong Kong about what they need and why it is important.

“When non-traditional opinions are expressed, people say ‘Your way of thinking is not Chinese.’”  
—Leadership Stakeholder participant

# Increasing Women's Participation in Government

The Women's Foundation's key precept is that any action we take be methodologically and strategically based in research. We turned to Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government Women's Policy Program, for help finding an empirically based method to encourage more leadership from women in Hong Kong. The result is a report by Kirstin M. Broderick, who worked as a summer intern with TWF in 2007. With this report, summarised below, we begin to explore the complex reasons behind the dearth of female political leaders in Hong Kong, as shown in our 2006 *Status Report* findings regarding women and leadership in Hong Kong.

## Research

Although Hong Kong has made great strides towards gender equity in the ten years since it became a signatory to the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), significant institutional and cultural obstacles linger throughout Hong Kong that prevent gender equity, obstacles which consequentially prevent all Hong Kong citizens from reaping the economic and societal benefits of gender equity. The World Economic Forum explains that gender gaps in political leadership/decision-making positions are particularly problematic because "the absence of women from structures of governance inevitably means that national, regional and local priorities—i.e. how resources are allocated—are typically defined without meaningful input from women, whose life experience gives them a different awareness of the community's needs, concerns and interests from that of men. Countries which do not capitalise on the full potential of one-half of their societies are misallocating their human resources and compromising their competitive potential."

In addition to balancing the distribution of resources throughout society and maximising competitive potential, equity in political leadership is also a route to achieving gender equity throughout all facets and levels of society. UNICEF's report, *The State of the World's Children 2007*, examines the discrimination and disempowerment women face throughout their lives and specifically cites that in order to eliminate gender discrimination and empower women and girls, increasing the role and number of women in political leadership positions is paramount.

But although gender equity in politics is one means to the dissolution of gender discrimination of all forms throughout society, and while it is a measure that is seemingly easy to attain in today's progressive world via measures such as quotas and gender mainstreaming, UNICEF's

2007 report sobers us to the reality that our world is still quite far from achieving gender equity in politics. At current rates of progress, we are still more than 60 years away from a world where women have an equal say in national parliaments.

Hong Kong is on par with the rest of the world with respect to both its illusions of gender equity within its borders, and with the glacial pace at which the limited work undertaken to correct gender inequity is being carried out. The findings of this qualitative study confirm established research citing cultural attitudes regarding the traditional role of women, inherent institutional barriers, and the general perception that Hong Kong has already bridged the gender gap as reasons for the persistence of gender inequity in Hong Kong.

But Hong Kong has not bridged the gender gap in political representation. Although females represented 52.32% of Hong Kong's population by the end of 2006, they did not hold anywhere near 50% of the decision-making positions in Hong Kong's government, much less holding the critical threshold of 30% of leadership positions recommended by CEDAW—to which Hong Kong is a signatory. It is only in the appointed positions to statutory bodies—which are mandated by quotas to be filled by 25% women—that women fill anywhere near (but still below) the number of positions in government as CEDAW mandates. But more often than not, these are not leading or decision-making roles that women are appointed to; rather they are entry-to-mid-level positions. In reality, and at best, women hold only 20% of leadership positions in any of Hong Kong's decision-making bodies (i.e., six out of the thirty Geographical Constituency representatives in Hong Kong's legislature are women); all other bodies of Hong Kong's government that are not subject to quotas have less than 20% women in leading positions. Local level politics in Hong Kong fare disturbingly worse: data from the latest village representative elections show that women hold less than one-tenth of one percent of political positions available (i.e., twelve out of 325, or 0.04% of village representatives are women).

## Collaborate

The TWF qualitative study was a preliminary gauge of the political climate for women leaders as seen by the current crop of political leaders in Hong Kong. Via one-on-one interviews with a convenience sample of current political leaders in Hong Kong, both male and female, from all levels of the government, the study aims to take a more in-depth look at the obstacles women face to becoming political leaders, as well as what is being—and can be—done to overcome those obstacles.

Twenty of Hong Kong's political leaders were interviewed, varying from locally-elected district councillors in small mountain villages near the mainland China border, to members of Hong Kong's highest-ranking elected body, the Legislative Council (LegCo), of whom members represented bodies as variant as the insurance industry, sports/culture and arts, or the public residing in a particular "geographical constituency" of Hong Kong, as well as the appointed heads of the governmental bodies that



deal most directly with issues related to women: the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Women's Commission, and the Bureau of Labour and Welfare (which were included to capture voices representing the government's official position on gender equity in Hong Kong).

The interviews assessed each politician's perception of both general and politically-focused gender issues in Hong Kong; barriers women face to becoming political leaders; respondent's knowledge and perceptions of two methods that current research has found most effective towards improving gender equity in politics: quota systems and gender mainstreaming; any other current initiatives respondents might know of to address these barriers; perceived pros and cons of any of these initiatives; and any recommendations respondents might have towards overcoming obstacles women face to becoming political leaders and/or suggestions to generally improve the status of female political representation in Hong Kong.

## Change

A full 53% of the political leaders interviewed said that Hong Kong has no gender issue. Additionally, every interviewee said that the general Hong Kong population (especially the people they represent) does not feel that Hong Kong has any gender related-issues, i.e., the general feeling in Hong Kong is that people here enjoy complete gender equality. After asking respondents whether they felt there was any gender-based discrimination in Hong Kong today, we gave each respondent the numerical breakdown of men and women leaders in Hong Kong to both illustrate the degree of gender inequity problems in Hong Kong, and the gravity of the problem specific to political leadership. While it was of interest that most politicians who initially claimed that there is gender equity in Hong Kong later conceded that there are indeed gender disparities once given the numerical breakdown of male and female political leaders there, what was more interesting was the degree of astonishment expressed at the level of inequity Hong Kong suffers by many of those who had acknowledged gender inequity in Hong Kong from the outset.

A number of barriers to change and strategic solutions were identified by those interviewed in this project.

### **Barriers to Change:**

- Traditional Chinese culture and Confucian value system imbedded in the hearts and minds of most Hong Kong citizens is the main underlying, and very subtle, root of any disparity found between the number

"People generally think there is equality, but in fact the inequality is subtle, because now women have higher educations, and there are more female professionals, and even in government's senior posts there are more women, but if you look closely at the government's structure, only two to three females are officials. So although people think women are higher than before, they have the wrong impression. People think that the number of female leaders is enough, therefore we have to work even harder to get more women into politics, to get more women into high ranking official positions, if high ranking sector is dominated by men, we can't change the system, and we must change the system from within."

—Mandy Tam, Legislative Councillor

and role of men and women in political office today.

- General apathy towards anything political (resulting from Hong Kong's very recent history as a former British Colony) is a contributing factor behind the low number of political leaders—men and women—in Hong Kong. Successful people in Hong Kong would much rather go into business than into politics.
- Lack of self confidence among women about their ability to get involved in politics
- Women's time constraints as care-givers
- Lack of recognition by the public and the government that there are serious gender-related issues in Hong Kong.
- There are seldom any openings for new political leaders
- Class disparity holds back potential leaders and gender discrimination is worse the poorer a person is.
- Hong Kong government efforts are not serious or effective

### **Suggested Solutions:**

- Increase education on the role and place of women in Hong Kong, both through academic curricula, texts, teacher behaviours, courses of study girls and boys are encouraged to take, and myriad other classroom factors that reinforce the status quo, but also through public information campaigns to reach those no longer in school, or who have not or will not go to school.
- Universal suffrage for elected positions—a majority of respondents felt that this issue should take priority over gender disparities in political leadership positions
- Make governmental positions full-time jobs so Hong Kong's political leaders will not need to rely on either a second job or a spouse's income in order to participate in politics in a leadership position
- Increase funding for women's groups to help them promote the voices of women's needs in Hong Kong
- Support and encourage women's groups to increase the role and number of women leaders in Hong Kong.
- Political mentorship programmes
- Quota systems for interviewees for political appointments
- Give it time

**Note:** The general reaction to external initiatives to increase the role and number of female political leaders in Hong Kong was rather negative. When discussing these initiatives, respondents urged recognition of Hong Kong's unique political and social history, which they emphasised cannot be ignored when assessing, much less attempting to address,

the situation of female leaders in politics here. Internationally-promoted methods like gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, or any form of gender-based quota systems were not very well received by respondents to this survey. An overwhelming majority of respondents knew little to nothing of gender mainstreaming—including the women interviewed. Some respondents had knowledge of quota systems, but had incorrect perceptions of exactly how and why quota systems were used. Of particular interest is that

“We can change these perceptions through policy and education; we probably need a little bit of both. A traditional mentality persists...”

—Timothy Tsun-Ting Fok,  
Legislative Councillor

45% said quotas wouldn't work because there aren't enough qualified or experienced women to fill the jobs. (The reality is that in the areas where quotas have been implemented in Hong Kong, quota targets were quickly met and succeeded by the availability of capable women.) The role of political parties in promoting women in politics was also not perceived by respondents to be promising.

## Conclusion

Respondents have cautioned that special care must be taken when evaluating the place and status of women in Hong Kong: the women's movement in Hong Kong must be understood under the light of its very unique social, political and economic history. Policies and measures must be understood from Hong Kong's unique political status as a Special Administrative Region just ten years out of 150 years of British colonial rule, now under the watchful eye of Beijing.

Hong Kong and China, and Asia in general, are the worst performers in gender equity measures compared to the rest of the world. The slow and steady route advocated by most respondents to this survey, while understandable from a historical perspective, should be balanced with the mounting evidence worldwide that empowering women improves the lives of the entire community.

To effectively foster change, public education is needed. In order to convince both legislators and the public that it is imperative to further the place of women in Hong Kong, they first must see that the prevalent perspective is that there is no gender problem in Hong Kong that's both incorrect and harmful to Hong Kong's future. More public awareness will accomplish two things: alert the public and the law makers of the reality and gravity of women's issues, and bring urgency and momentum to the cause by illuminating an issue previously considered to be negligible.

Further research is also needed, including a comprehensive, empirical assessment of current perspectives of the status of women, both from elected and appointed officials and from the general population (done through the census bureau).

Concurrently with this survey, all current leaders and politicians should be surveyed to individually assess their levels of education attained, at which institutions any higher education was attained, family backgrounds, prior locales lived, marital and family status, and previous professional history (in general terms, so to assess what the economic/career realities might look like post-politics). With this information we may be able to both identify capable women leaders and develop strategies to place women on a path to political leadership.

# Realising the Promise of Hong Kong's Girls

“From talking to experts in this area, we come to the conclusion that differences not only exist between boys and girls, but also among students of the same sex. Ability varies from individual to individual and a good education system should cope with students’ individual differences and help them realise their aspirations to reach their full potential.”

—Raymond Tang, Chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission

Women start life as girls, and their girlhood experiences form their personalities and ambitions. Both our initial *Status Report* and the March 2006 Symposium and Stakeholder Forum helped TWF conclude that working with girls is key to helping women in Hong Kong realise their full potential. TWF is committed to social change, which means that we seek to make changes in root causes. For women, the root causes are the gender expectations that frame and limit their goals and achievements. Girls are saddled with these stereotypes at birth, if not before. So, too, are boys! It is critical to tear down the institutional barriers that keep girls from overcoming these stereotypes.

To address this issue, The Women’s Foundation invited community leaders from the private and public sectors, as well as girls and young women themselves to contribute their views and ideas to the dialogue about how to empower girls and young women.

Our discussions with these leaders further underlined the need for collaboration among all segments of the Hong Kong community to work harder with girls. Their ideas make it clear that we must spend more time and effort thinking about girls and learning about their needs. We must be more creative in our programmes for girls, fund more programmes for girls, address stereotyping and rigid gender role modeling in education, in the family, in media and in the workplace. And, as reflected in the need for mentoring to develop leadership potential among women, we also need women mentors for the coming generations.

## Research

In mid-2007, about 23% of Hong Kong’s population were youth, defined by the Census and Statistics Department as being over the age of four and under the age of twenty-four. Of these, 49.7% were girls.<sup>2</sup>

Much research on girls tends to be problem-oriented. And in the area of problems (eg addiction, pregnancy and eating disorders, crime and debt) and emotional problems (eg depression), girls seem to be increasingly at risk. But while most girls thrive and are increasingly performing

2. Census and Statistics Department website, Table: Population by Age Group and Sex [http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hong\\_kong\\_statistics/statistical\\_tables/index.jsp?htmlTableID=002&excelID=&chartID=&tableID=002&ID=&subjectID=1](http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hong_kong_statistics/statistical_tables/index.jsp?htmlTableID=002&excelID=&chartID=&tableID=002&ID=&subjectID=1).

at high levels in education and sports, when we look at women, we see that the girls they were are not becoming the women they could be. Why not? What is holding girls back?

## Gender equality in education

According to an EOC estimate based on computer simulation, if boys and girls were admitted solely according to academic merit, girls would constitute 59% of Secondary 1 students in Band 1.<sup>3</sup>

As discussed in the *Status Report*, EOC research examining the nature and extent of stereotyping in printed educational materials found extensive stereotyping in gender, as well as age, disability, single-parenthood and ethnicity. Participants in our focus groups were well aware of this problem. According to Yvonne Liu, GM teachers, Cheng Chek Chee Secondary School, “The success of gender awareness education hinges on the gender awareness of teachers and headmasters. It is important to train the educators first, before attempting to educate the students.” Another participant predicted resistance to this idea: “Teachers’ attitudes and the language they use often reinforce gender inequality, e.g. assumptions about physical differences/abilities, leadership capabilities, etc. But staff development on gender perspective is not always welcomed by the administrators or the teachers themselves.”

## Programmes for girls must include minority girls and less fortunate girls

Many of our participants stated that programmes for girls and research about girls did not take into account differences in their socioeconomic status. The *Status Report* showed that the percentages of female ethnic minorities who attended school were lower in all age groups than among their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

## Family roles hold many girls back

The girls who participated in our stakeholder meetings were very clear about the family constraints they faced. For example, some participants felt they got a better sense of self after they moved out of the family home. A participant noted that her family has different expectations for boys and girls. “It begins with my father. He often says, ‘A fish will not grow without crossing to another pond’, which means as a boy you must leave your homeland to grow. He does not expect the same for girls. My job requires me to travel to China four to six days a week. I had to prove to my father and the family that I know what I am doing before they would accept my taking such a job.”

“Both girls and boys need and deserve an education that is free from traditional gender stereotypes, an education that enables them to choose freely from a wide range of options and thus provides their nations and the world with citizens capable of contributing to both the economy and the political and social framework of their communities and the wider world.”

—Susan McGee Bailey,  
Executive Director, Wellesley  
Centers for Women

3. Grace Mak, “Girls’ Education in HK: Incidental Gains and Postponed Inequality” (paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of Gender Equity Education in the Asia-Pacific Region, Hong Kong, June 2006).
4. *The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong 2006* (Hong Kong: TWF, 2006) 100.

## Girls are not becoming leaders

As discussed in our Leadership report, as girls become women, they are not assuming a fair role in the leadership of our community. (See the Hong Kong Leadership Statistics chart in the Leadership chapter above for specific data on women in decision-making positions in Hong Kong.) We found that those participants who felt women were succeeding as leaders tended to redefine the standard. For example, the student leaders in our stakeholder groups pointed out that the student union is based on consensus leadership. In this case, even if the president is male, all sixteen executives are considered to be leaders. In the view of one student leader, female participation was high even though the key positions are mainly held by men. This same redefinition of a leadership definition was applied to Hong Kong's political arena, as participants noted that although most of the key positions are held by men, there are a significant number of women involved in the political scene.

## Girls' sense of self

The *Status Report* revealed a paucity of information about youth in general and girls in particular. What little is known is disturbing: rapidly rising drug use, under-reported sexual abuse, depression and concerns with body image—all are found among Hong Kong girls.<sup>5</sup> But without more research, it is difficult to draw conclusions. Our participants certainly felt that girls in Hong Kong are at risk.

## Women and girls internalise the stereotypes

Women and girls are deeply influenced by the stereotyping messages that inundate us, and the participants in our discussions expressed conflicting and conflicted views of women and leadership. Frequently, women expressed a view that valued highly the attributes that are seen as womanly, acknowledging that these attributes can cut women off from leadership roles. Women sometimes reject a male model of leadership, accepting the “cost” of that rejection.

## Collaborate

### Multi-Stakeholder Engagement Programme on Girls' Development, July 2007

The Women's Foundation held a series of interviews and focus groups during the month of July 2007 to better understand the issues and challenges facing Hong Kong's girls today. We convened twenty-four opinion leaders, including girls themselves, from a cross-section of sectors in the community, including academics, NGOs and social service organisations. Four focus groups and four individual interviews were held to discuss the current status of girls' development as well as barriers and accelerators to their progress. The discussions also explored strategies for our future programming, research and grant-making work. The diverse experience and perspectives of our participants provided a rich dialogue and range of ideas for empowering girls to become economically self-reliant and successful leaders.

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5. *Status Report*, Chapter VI

## Stakeholder Event Goals

- Engage multiple stakeholders on girls' development in Hong Kong.
- Identify factors conducive to girls' development.
- Identify NGOs, programmes, campaigns and paradigms that foster girls' development.
- Gather recommendations for strategic solutions in programming, funding and policy initiatives which empower girls and young women.
- Make recommendations to the Hong Kong community.

## Session Format

In four two-hour focus group sessions and four individual interviews, we asked opinion leaders to help The Women's Foundation share observations and identify research that would illuminate the issues girls face in their development in Hong Kong. We also wanted to learn about programmes already in existence in Hong Kong, and their perceived effectiveness. Participants were asked to identify the primary barriers girls face to achieving equal opportunity in life. What would be some factors that do or might help girls achieve their full potential? What are the skills, competencies and capacities in girls and young women necessary to prepare them for full participation in society? What is the gap between equal access to education and full participation in society? How do we develop more girls and young women to be the leaders of tomorrow? We also asked for actionable suggestions on how to effect positive change in the area of girls' development in Hong Kong. What structural and cultural shifts would have to occur? What role can the various sectors play?

## Change

Change is not possible without a vision for a better future nor without strategies and tactics to accomplish the change that is envisioned. The participants in this girls' stakeholder forum agreed that change must start with girls. They offered not only insights on some of the key issues and barriers to change, but also a number of ideas for positive change.

"There is very little in-depth research on understanding girls. It is good to see more efforts in this area in recent years."

—Professor Grace Mak, HK Institute of Education

## **We need to think more about girls, learn more about girls and include all kinds of girls in our thinking. We need more research!**

- According to our participants, more research and observation on girls and young women are needed. More research on gender equality is needed. Gender research should focus on how people view family, career and society.
- In order to tailor solutions not only to different ages of girls, but different types of girls (normal vs. disadvantaged, university-bound vs. those who would not be able to get into university, normal vs. troubled girls), we need to really understand those girls and what will work for

them. For TWF, this means identifying which NGOs are working with girls, assessing their effectiveness and identifying programmes that will make an impact.

### **More funding (and more innovative funding) is vital**

- There is no question that social change for women and girls will cost money. Raising resources for women and girls is a challenge TWF is accepting.
- It is not just a question of more money, but also “smart” money. Participants also suggested that we help design funding structures that will support multiple-year programmes and those that will require longer time to see results.

“When I was young, there were two scouting associations: Scout Association and Girl Guides Association. I did not like the latter because the girls were only allowed to do sewing and cookery. I always wondered why boys could do hiking, rope works and many challenging activities while girls could not. So I joined the Scout Association and I would do pretty much the same as boys. Most of the activities are designed so that boys and girls can equally participate. Girls also get the same responsibilities of carrying tents, food and other physically demanding activities.”

—Stakeholder participant

### **We must fight stereotyping**

#### **Family**

- Participants had no doubt that familial and societal expectations can limit girls. Also participants felt that parents need help in educating their children. The idea of training parents—equipping them with knowledge, skills and confidence to raise a family free of gender bias—came up repeatedly.
- More education is needed in health services and sex education, and this is a role families can take on more effectively. Participants noted especially that it is imperative to talk about dating issues, citing growing dating violence due to the imbalance of power between boys and girls.

#### **Education**

The forum generated extensive support for better gender education and many suggestions on how this might be accomplished.

- The most appropriate place for better gender education is most likely in the schools. Gender education can be incorporated in secondary schools in a number of ways: civic education classes; personal counselling provided by teachers and/or resident social workers; and liberal studies or integrated humanities classes.
- Participants felt that the success of gender awareness education hinges on the gender awareness of teachers and headmasters. They noted that teachers are role models. For that reason they felt it is important to train the educators first, before attempting to educate the student.
- It was suggested to make education more inclusive by expanding educational funding sources. The cost of education was cited as a barrier.
- Commenting that girls are held responsible in Hong Kong society for unwanted pregnancies, a participant saw this creating a barrier to girls because of the stigma attached. More training programmes should be offered to help single mothers re-enter the job market.



### **Media/Public Awareness**

Our participants recognised the media as a potential ally, making several suggestions.

- Prime-time media public service announcements to promote gender awareness/try to dispel gender stereotyping.
- Use internet websites, blogs and chat-rooms like 'you tube' and others which have high visibility with children and youth.
- Encourage community events and forums organised to discuss family responsibilities and gender roles.

*"I will be comfortable if family responsibilities are an informed choice rather than a coerced/assumed duty."*

—Stakeholder participant

### **Support more mentoring, leadership training and career-building initiatives**

- Mentoring programmes were endorsed by most participants as being a vital component to bringing up girl and boy leaders. Good mentoring programmes should expose girls to a wide variety of perspectives. Information mentoring seems to work better than formal mentoring.
- A broader definition of leadership should be embraced and all kinds of leaders should be recognised—a true element of social change.
- Corporate recruiting on campuses (and even sometimes in secondary schools) is increasingly being done by men AND women. Women recruiters can be very effective in convincing girls and young women that there are career opportunities for them in the financial field.
- Businesses can help encourage women by offering more family-friendly benefits like parental leave and child care facilities or allowances. This would eliminate some of the perceived obstacles to success in the workplace.

### **Increase educational opportunities for women and girls**

Several ideas seemed focused on helping women and girls who have fallen behind in our society. For example, a plea for quality vocational programmes explained that the gaps need to be closed between skills and job market needs.

Accelerate social change through policy and governmental reform.

- Our forum also generated a range of policy suggestions, from promoting the current Sex and Family Status Discrimination Ordinances to advocating for sexual orientation discrimination legislation as well as creating a Gender Equality Commission.
- It was pointed out the government could take a lead in gender equality training as a way of raising awareness. Joining a growing chorus worldwide, our participants recognised that gender equality should be discussed in the context of human rights. Equal rights are human rights, and should be protected accordingly by the government.

## Conclusion

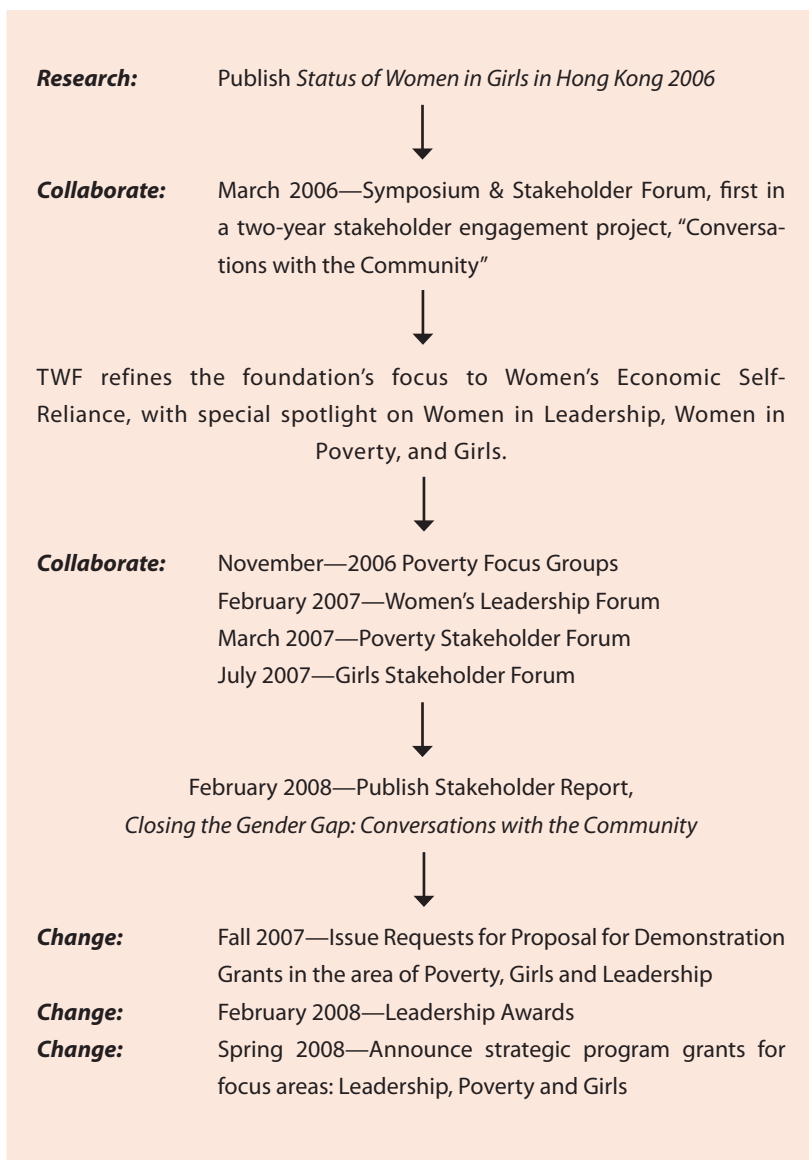
After all the laws are written, policies framed and research completed—and there is certainly much to be done in these areas—we still behave in the ways we were taught. To teach women to be self-reliant leaders in society, we must start with teaching girls—and boys—to approach their lives without stereotypes. This is a very difficult and a very long-term task, but the participants in our discussions clearly state that we must fight stereotypes and we must start early.

Our participants have made concrete suggestions. Yet it is clear that we really don't know how to reach girls and what works. Creative NGOs and governmental bodies around the world and in Hong Kong are working to find effective programmes for girls, and we at TWF will work to identify and support initiatives to help girls in Hong Kong achieve their promise.

# Making Change Happen

## Conclusion

What is difficult to convey in a written report is the energy and commitment shown by our participants as we begin our work to effect real change for women and girls in Hong Kong. Our meetings hummed with excitement and ideas. In the words of one of our keynote speakers, Laura Liswood, we found “those who dare to fight for change.” Now we must capture that energy and direct it to effective programmes for women and girls in Hong Kong, to build to the tipping point. We hope to look back on 2007 as the year that change began.



## Research

The more we learn the more we realise how much there is to learn. We are committed to creative, effective ideas that will achieve real results. We must try new approaches but we must do that with a thorough understanding of the needs of those we seek to help.

Sometimes, simple obstacles thwart efficacy—such as a programme for girls that is located in an area that they can't get to, or a programme for single moms that does not include child care. Sometimes we might get things wrong, but if we learn from that experience change will happen. TWF is committed to learning through research.

## Collaborate

The knowledge is there. As we can see from our stakeholder process, there are people in the community who...

- Understand the role that women and girls could have in a free and equal society
- See clearly that women and girls need help to achieve that role
- Are willing to be creative in helping them
- Have the knowledge and experience to design programmes that will work for Hong Kong.

As we have from the beginning, we plan to work with the community to build on that knowledge. As we move towards grantmaking, we will be working with community partners to accomplish our goals.

## Change

Time and time again, women who came to our events spoke about the limiting, binding, pressing burdens of gender stereotypes. Everything we do must be designed to fight these stereotypes, either head-on or by example.

A key theme across all topics is the need for research, education, training and gender education for our children. Families, teachers, managers, professionals, the media—at every point in society we need to help women and especially girls choose their own futures without having to fit into an arbitrary role. Some will choose to be mothers, others to lead in more public ways, but the choice must be freely made. No girl in Hong Kong (and no boy either) should be discouraged from any career or role she aspires to follow. We will help with programmes like mentoring and training and education for girls.

Women are in financial peril, a problem that will haunt Hong Kong as women age into ever worse poverty. We must focus on women's needs in the area of poverty and look into ideas for child care, smarter re-skilling, financial literacy and entrepreneurial training, as ways to better help women and their daughters escape poverty.

Women are natural leaders. They lead every day. We need to help women understand and apply their leadership skills, and to be comfortable taking public leadership roles. We can do this by mentoring and training leaders in business

and in the community. Not every woman leader will speak out on behalf of women, but we believe, based on our leadership forum and interviews, that as a group, women leaders will think more about the role of women in society.

At TWF we are committed to doing everything we can. We plan to continue to commission research, to build resources, and to partner with the community in developing programmes to help women and girls. Based on our four years of research and community engagement we have determined to work under the umbrella of Women's Economic Self-reliance in three strategic focus areas: Girls, Women in Leadership, and Women in Poverty.

Of course, The Women's Foundation cannot do it all. Our stakeholder engagement process identified many ways that others in the community can be agents of change for women and girls:

**The Academy:** Support and disseminate more research and press for more research.

**Media:** Commit to more and better representation of women and girls in the media as well as effective use of media skills to promote and educate on issues of importance to women and girls.

**Business:** Promote diversity in every way, train managers to recognise a wider range of leadership, adopt family friendly policies, recruit diversely and encourage business schools to train leaders who value diversity.

**Government:** Eradicate gender stereotyping in education, serve as a role model, enact more laws protecting women and the human right to equality, encourage and support gender research and include more women in the political process.

**Religious Institutions:** Speak out against gender stereotyping, take a moral stance against female poverty and violence against women and promote women leaders within the church hierarchy.

**NGOs:** Take heart! Be creative and strong. Think through how your programmes affect women and girls and whether they are inadvertently neglecting them.

**Funders:** View funding decisions through a gender lens. Take a chance on innovative ideas. Fund capacity-building as well as programmes. Expect documentation of results.

And last, but most important...

**Women and Girls:** INSIST UPON CHANGE! Run for office, ask for a promotion, speak out, raise your sons and daughters to be free of gender bias, take that engineering course. Do what you must to support equality for women and girls.

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