

Gender Equalization of Educational and Career Opportunities in Hong Kong

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Introduction

Reaction to the 1993 Green Paper, “Equal Opportunities for Women and Men,” indicated that Hong Kong citizens wanted strong action taken against gender discrimination. Within twelve months, the Hong Kong government proposed anti-discrimination legislation, which later resulted in the establishment of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) and the founding of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in 1996. The SDO outlines the areas of activity in which it outlaws gender discrimination, and the top two activities it focuses on are employment and education. The EOC enforces the SDO. (“Equal Opportunities for Women and Men,” p. 1)

The founding chairperson of the EOC, Fanny Cheung, articulated why Hong Kong should strive to eliminate gender discrimination in employment and education when she stated, “In a fair, open and progressive society, people with the relevant talent and skill should be given an equal opportunity to receive education and training to compete in the labour market without making reference to unrelated factors such as sex.” (“TDC News...,” p. 1) Cheung believed that Hong Kong will continue its economic success only if it can effectively use its human resources. Maximizing Hong Kong’s human resources, however, requires that people receive equal educational opportunities so that the most qualified person gets the job. The existence of gender discrimination prevents this maximization from happening in some instances. The purpose of this article

is to explore how proportional women's career opportunities are to their educational attainments in Hong Kong and to analyze the Hong Kong government's progress towards making career opportunities proportional to educational achievements for women.

Analyzing this relationship is important because it identifies where Hong Kong must direct its efforts in eliminating gender discrimination in schools and in the workplace.

I will first compare the education of females and the education of males in Hong Kong in order to analyze the proportionality of women's career opportunities to their educational achievements. Secondly, I will examine the career opportunities that women have in Hong Kong in order to determine which careers are typically associated with females and what considerations exist, unique to females, in choosing a career path. Thirdly, I will discuss the role the EOC is playing in both identifying and eliminating gender discrimination in education and employment. Finally, I will attempt to forecast how successful Hong Kong will be in curbing future gender discrimination.

Education and the Sexes

How does the education of a female differ from the education of a male in Hong Kong? According to the Compulsory Education Act (1971), which made nine years of education both mandatory and free for all Hong Kong children, there should be no difference between a girl's education and a boy's education for their first nine years. (Mak and Yue-ping, p.16) In the past, however, parents' attitudes towards male and female children created a difference. Parents used to expect their daughters to drop out of school and work in order to support their brothers' education because the education of a son was believed to be a better investment than that of a daughter. (Leung, pp. 82-83) Studies conducted throughout the 1990s show that more parents support sending their

daughters to school, which explains the increased enrollment of females in schools since 1971. (Mak and Yue-ping, p. 16) In fact, in 1997 there were 29,870 females and 24,467 males enrolled in secondary 6 and 7 courses, which are the equivalent of first-year college courses in the United States. (“Full-time Enrollment...”) Nonetheless, the opportunity for girls and boys to receive an education at the primary level is virtually equal. (Mak and Yue-ping, p. 18)

A review of the selection process for secondary education, however, reveals an imbalance in opportunity for girls and boys. Hong Kong’s education system is exam-oriented with 15-year-old students taking examinations called Internal Assessments (IAs) in science, mathematics, languages, and social studies to determine which secondary schools they will attend. (Po-king, pp. 109-11) The IAs are designed and scored by the individual primary schools for their own students. (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 36) In order to scale students’ results from all IAs administered in the different primary schools, students are also required to take the same standardized test called the Academic Aptitude Test (AAT). The AAT serves as a scale by which IA scores from different schools can be fairly compared. (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 39) These examinations are a part of the Secondary School Places Allocation system (SSPA). (“Executive Summary...,” p. 1) The SSPA takes the IA scores, scales them using the AAT results, and places males and females into separate rank orders of academic merit. These male and female rank orders are each broken down into three separate bands. (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 44) There is no method of ranking students within bands. For example, all students in Band One are placed in secondary schools before all students

in Band Two. A lottery system is then used to decide where the students within Band One attend secondary school. Students in Band One are placed in their top choice secondary schools, but their placement depends on the limits of male and female slots in co-educational schools that are trying to maintain an equal ratio of males to females. (“Equal Opportunities Commission’s Response...,” p.1) Though both boys and girls are subject to the SSPA system, the system impacts them differently. It has been found that in general girls do better on IAs and boys do better on AATs. (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 51) The result of this discrepancy is that girls generally need higher scores to get into a band than boys do. Since the band ultimately determines which secondary school a student attends, girls are less likely to get their top choice secondary schools. (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 63)

It is not only the allocation of students in secondary schools that poses a threat to equal opportunity for education among women and men. The IAs are also used to “stream” students into either the arts or sciences based on their subject test results. Students who do well are typically streamed into the “academically superior and prestigious” sciences, whereas students who do not perform as well on the examinations are streamed into the arts. Due to the stereotype that views sciences as being a “male” subject area and arts as being a “female” subject area, only those females who score exceptionally well on the standardized exams are streamed into the sciences. (Po-king, pp. 110-11) This streaming is evident in Table 1, which shows the breakdown of gender participation in both the arts and science streams in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). The HKCEE is an examination Hong Kong students

take around the age of 17 as they complete secondary 5, which is the United States' equivalent of eleventh grade. (Po-king, p. 109) The examination tests various subject areas depending on whether students want to pursue a "science track" or a "humanities track" in their higher education. ("Hong Kong...") The table shows that there are more females than males in every subject area of the arts stream and fewer females than males in every subject area of the science stream.

Table 1

Gender Ratios¹ for Subjects in the Arts, Science, and Applied Vocational Streams, Certificate of Education Examination, 1976-1992

Arts Stream	1976	1982	1986	1992
History	0.65	0.49	0.48	0.47
Chinese Literature	0.91	0.61	0.52	0.41
Geography	0.97	0.64	0.57	0.54
Science Stream				
Physics	3.35	2.85	2.52	2.09
Chemistry	2.82	2.63	2.38	1.98
Additional Mathematics	3.41	2.83	2.40	1.95
Biology	1.10	1.10	1.41	1.58
Applied Vocational Stream				
Principles of Accounts	0.50	0.36	0.42	0.43
Commerce	n.a.	0.29	0.44	0.43
Electronics & Electricity	*	73	345	146
Design & Technology	n.a.	70	*	*
Metalwork	*	*	*	93
Home Economics	n.a.	0.01	0.01	0.01
Needlework	0	0	0	0

* This indicates that there were no female candidates taking the subject.

n.a. = subject not yet introduced

Source: Po-king, p. 110.

Though the ratios of males to females decreased in all subjects in the science stream except for biology between 1976 and 1992, the arts remain female-dominated and the sciences male-dominated. Gender segregation is perhaps at its worst in vocational

¹ Number of male candidates for every female candidate.

subjects. For example, in 1986 the ratio of males to females in Electronics and Electricity was 345:1. As Choi Po-king points out, “There is no local anti-sex discrimination act or equal opportunities act that prohibits schools from offering different subjects to males and females.” (Po-king, p. 113) In other words, it is still possible to allow only men to take a technology class and only women to take a home economics class. In July 1999, the EOC released a report that affirmed this, noting that 85 percent of co-educational schools did not give students the freedom of choice between studying design and technology or home economics education, suggesting that “cultural and social traditions as well as existing practices affected girls’ opportunities in receiving technology education.” No mention was made about how these traditions affected boys’ opportunities in receiving home economics education. (“EOC Organizes...”)

Separate curriculum and streaming as a result of examination results have also led to gender imbalances among different fields of study in tertiary education. These imbalances are shown in Table 2. The table breaks down the Hong Kong population with tertiary education² by comparing the percentage distribution of all males, all females, and all people in general (both sexes) who had completed tertiary education in particular areas of study as of 1986 and as of 1996. For example, in 1986, 20.7 percent of all males but 31.3 percent of all females with tertiary education had completed curricula in business, commercial and computer studies. These fields of study were therefore the most popular for both sexes (25 percent of all people with tertiary education had focused their studies in this subject area), and they were also mainly female fields of study. In

² In Hong Kong, tertiary education is three years of undergraduate studies students may pursue after they have completed secondary 7, which is equivalent to the first year of college in the United States. (“Hong Kong...”)

Table 2

Percentage Distribution of Population with Tertiary Education by Field of
Education and Sex, 1986 and 1996

Field of Study		1986 (%)	1996 (%)
Business, Commercial & Computer Studies	Male	20.7	28.6
	Female	31.3	34.9
	Both Sexes	25.0	31.4
Arts & Social Sciences	Male	17.1	14.9
	Female	22.2	23.1
	Both Sexes	19.1	18.5
Mechanical, Electrical, Electronic and Marine Engineering	Male	20.9	19.9
	Female	1.6	1.6
	Both Sexes	13.1	11.8
Architecture & Construction Engineering	Male	11.4	11.2
	Female	1.6	2.1
	Both Sexes	7.4	7.2
Medical & Health Related Studies	Male	5.9	4.5
	Female	13.5	9.6
	Both Sexes	9.0	6.8
Pure Science	Male	8.3	8.1
	Female	4.6	5.1
	Both Sexes	6.8	6.8
Education	Male	5.0	2.9
	Female	14.7	10.1
	Both Sexes	8.9	6.1
Textile, Design, & Other Industrial Technology	Male	4.3	3.6
	Female	3.5	3.6
	Both Sexes	4.0	3.6
Other Vocational Studies	Male	6.4	6.4
	Female	7.0	.8
	Both Sexes	6.6	7.9
Total	Male	225,365	428,584
	Female	151,172	339,936
	Both Sexes	376,537	768,520

Source: "Percentage Distribution of Population with Tertiary Education by Field of Education and Sex, 1986 and 1996."

1996, 28.6 percent of males and 34.9 percent of females with tertiary education had completed studies in business, commercial and computer studies, increasing the overall percentage of both males and females with tertiary education in these subject areas to 31.4 percent.

That business, commercial and computer studies are more attractive to women is indicative of the changes Hong Kong's economy has undergone since the 1980s. Before the 1980s, Hong Kong's economy was mainly a manufacturing economy supported by a labor force largely comprised of women. (Chiu and Lee, p. 2) In the 1980s, Hong Kong's economy shifted from manufacturing to a service economy, displacing women workers in manufacturing companies and forcing them to find service jobs.³ This shift has resulted in women taking up a larger percentage of clerical positions (in 1976, 11.8 percent of female workers worked in a clerical occupation; in 1986, this increased to 22.7 percent; in 1996, it increased to 28.5 percent). (Wong, p. 55) With the increase in female enrollment in schools, the shift made it possible for women to seek higher profile service jobs that require business, commercial and computer studies.

Though business, commercial and computer studies seem to be mainly female fields of study, the most extreme gender differences are observed in male-dominated fields of study. In 1986, 20.9 percent of males but only 1.6 percent of females with tertiary education had completed studies in mechanical, electrical, electronic and marine engineering. Ten years later, little change had occurred. In 1996, 19.9 percent of the males and 1.6 percent of the females with tertiary education had completed studies in these engineering subjects.

Arts and social science, medical and health related studies, and education remained predominantly female fields of study between 1986 and 1996. These fields of study have led women into nursing and teaching careers which have required fewer years of tertiary education than other careers such as mechanical, electrical, electronic and

³ See Brian McDonnell's article in this volume, "Keeping Pace with Economic Restructuring: An Assessment of How Hong Kong Labor Has Fared under Structural Transformation."

marine engineering.⁴ As a result, proportionally fewer women receiving tertiary education have earned degrees in the past than men (Wong, p. 58), though a survey conducted in 1997 shows those women ages 16-24 have 0.85 more years of education than men. (“A Baseline...,” section 5)

Career Opportunities and the Sexes

Though recent studies show that Hong Kong women are becoming increasingly educated, earlier studies show that despite their education, Hong Kong culture forced women to stay at home as *wife* and *mother* rather than hold jobs that their education prepared them for. This view is still commonly held, and it directly influences the career choices Hong Kong women make. (Leung, p. 83) For example, many women still feel responsible for providing their families with dinner at night, forcing them either to take jobs that allow them this flexibility or to not take jobs requiring that they work through dinner hours. (Chiu and Lee, p. 27)

The limitations that domestic responsibilities place on women have channeled women most noticeably into the professions of teaching and nursing, which presumably allow women the time they feel is necessary to devote to their families. (Mak and Yue-ping, p. 26) However, the attractiveness of these professions is not solely based on the flexibility they afford women, but it is also a result of what Choi Po-king calls “life experiences.” (Po-king, p. 112) Women typically have different life experiences as they grow up that teach them the skill of how to care for others. As a result, women tend to pursue careers in teaching and nursing because these careers require this skill. On the

⁴Nursing and teaching careers in Hong Kong have required tertiary non-degree education, which is equivalent to associate degree and certificate programs in the United States.

other hand, women tend not to pursue careers in scientific professions because these careers do not require this skill. (Po-king, p. 113)

Higher levels of education for women have helped combat the limitations that social expectations place on their pursuit of a career. In general, highly educated women end up in better paying jobs and therefore earn enough income to hire help for their domestic responsibilities with the availability of low cost Filipino and Thai maids. (Mak and Yue-ping, p. 28) In many instances, less-educated women cannot get jobs that provide enough income to hire help so they stay at home. Grace C. L. Mak and Chung Yue-ping completed a study in 1997 titled “Education and Labour Force Participation of Women in Hong Kong,” which revealed that “woman’s decision to join and stay in the labour market is conditioned by a complex set of factors,” namely marital status and fertility. (Mak and Yue-ping, p. 28) If the economic rewards (income) do not exceed the cost of help in keeping up with domestic responsibilities, most women are forced back into their homes.

Hong Kong’s economic shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy has also affected whether or not women have held jobs or remained at home. As Stephen W.K. Chiu and Ching Kwan Lee point out, this economic shift “pushes women workers both downward on the class ladder and backward to domesticity as their gender destiny.” (Chiu and Lee, p. 15) Service jobs offer lower pay and hours that interfere with domestic responsibilities whereas manufacturing jobs generally offer higher pay and customary working hours. (Chiu and Lee, p. 38) Education, however, can afford women more flexibility in choosing whether or not they want to remain at home or pursue their own careers.

Education does help overcome gender barriers in labor force participation for women. (Mak and Yue-ping, p. 21) When lower paying jobs are eliminated, it is the poorly educated who tend to be laid off first. (Mak and Yue-ping, p. 26) Education also serves to lessen gender differences in earnings in Hong Kong.

In a study on sex discrimination and sexual harassment in employment completed in 1997, Wing Suen found that “the increase in earnings experienced by Hong Kong women has been largely a result of the rising number of better educated women.” (Suen) He found that in Hong Kong, the female-male earnings ratio in 1991 was 0.71, compared to 0.68 in the United States (1992) and 0.63 in the United Kingdom (1992). Though Hong Kong’s female-male earnings ratio seems to compare favorably with other countries, other statistics indicate that gender differences in earnings in Hong Kong are widespread.

A statistical analysis completed by the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department in 1996 on monthly incomes from main employment revealed that 16.5 percent of the female population received less than 3,999 HK\$ whereas only 5.47 percent of the male population fell into this lowest income bracket. The gender differences in the highest income bracket are also revealing: 18.69 percent of the male population received 20,000 HK\$ or more compared to only 11.4 percent of the female population. These figures indicate a striking gender imbalance in incomes from main employment in Hong Kong. (“Working Population...”)

A United Nations study titled *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* looked at women in administrative and managerial positions in different countries. The study revealed that gender imbalances in higher paying jobs are prevalent in Hong Kong.

For example, it showed that only 18 percent of administrative and managerial workers in Hong Kong were women, compared to 44 percent in the United States, and 33 percent in the United Kingdom. (*The World's Women 2000...*)

Gender imbalances in higher paying jobs can be seen in female-dominated careers too. In 1991, over 75 percent of primary school teachers in Hong Kong were women, 56.7 percent of secondary non-graduate teachers were women, and 45.1 percent of secondary graduate teachers were women. (Po-king, p. 115) However, Hong Kong women typically occupy the lower paying teaching positions in primary schools whereas men generally occupy the higher paying administrative positions in those schools. Hong Kong men also tend to hold down the higher paying teaching positions in universities. (Po-king, p. 117)

The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC)

Gender imbalances exist in education and in career opportunities in Hong Kong. The Equal Opportunities Commission, established by the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO), however, is the driving force behind eliminating this gender discrimination in Hong Kong. The EOC is a statutory body whose primary task is to promote equal opportunity for men and women. Its five-pronged strategy to eliminate gender discrimination includes the following:

- Securing compliance with the SDO and reform through legislative means;
- Promoting education to raise public awareness of gender inequality and achieve change to make opportunities equal between men and women;
- Strengthening communication with community organizations to promote more participation in helping eliminate gender discrimination;
- Building corporate partnerships to encourage equal opportunity practices and prevention of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace;

- Conducting research to guide Hong Kong’s forward direction towards gender equality. (“Equal Opportunities Commission—Vision and Mission”)

In July 1998 when the Education Department first revealed how the Secondary School Placement Allocation system worked, the fifth goal of the EOC’s strategy was at least partially fulfilled. The EOC responded to parents’ concerns that the SSPA system had created gender imbalances, and an investigation was launched by the EOC in September 1998. (“Executive Summary...,” p.1) By April 1999, the EOC reported its findings, citing the following three aspects of the SSPA system as being gender biased:

1. Boys and girls in the same school are treated unequally because their Internal Assessment scores are scaled according to separate gender grading curves, which are produced from Academic Aptitude Test results. The scaled IA scores then produce the final scores used for secondary school placement.
2. Boys and girls are placed into two separate rank orders of academic merit. These rank orders are each broken down into three separate bands. Since males and females are ranked separately, band-cutting scores⁵ differ between sexes.
3. Co-educational secondary schools are required to admit a fixed proportion of boys and girls. Maintaining a fixed proportion of boys and girls prevents students from being admitted to secondary schools solely on merit. (“Equal Opportunities Commission’s Response...,” p. 1)

The EOC believed the SSPA violated section 5(1)(a) of the SDO, which stated that “a person discriminates against a woman in any circumstances relevant for the purposes of any provision of the SDO if, on the grounds of her sex, he treats her less favorably than he treats or would treat a man.” (*Sex Discrimination Ordinance*) In short, the EOC believed that the SSPA system discriminated primarily against girls. The Director of Education, Mrs. Helen Yu Lai Ching-ping, however, argued in a letter to the EOC dated April 2000 that the SSPA made “due allowance for the inherent developmental differences between boys and girls” since boys develop later than girls. (*Equal*

⁵ A band-cutting score is the score that distinguishes a higher band from a lower band.

Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education, Section 21) She believed that changing the SSPA would cause gender discrimination against boys. In her argument, the Director cited section 48 of the SDO that states “nothing shall render unlawful an act that is reasonably intended to ensure that persons of a particular sex have equal opportunities with other persons.” (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 22) In an attempt to avoid litigation, the Director convinced the EOC that the SSPA system was a “system in change” and that eventually the gender imbalances would be corrected.

However, by July 2000, no changes had occurred, and as a result the EOC brought the Director of Education to Hong Kong’s Court of First Instance⁶ in May 2001. Writing for the Court in June 2001, Judge M.J. Hartmann found the SSPA system unlawful in all three aspects that the EOC had identified. (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 142) In response to the Director of Education’s concern that revisions of the current SSPA system would cause gender discrimination against boys, Judge Hartmann stated: “I certainly do not see [the Director’s] concern as one which excuses the present use of gender-based mechanisms.” (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 141) The Department of Education is expected to revise the SSPA system so that there are no gender imbalances in opportunities to attend the best possible secondary schools, though it has not been given a specific time frame in which to do so. Judge Hartmann, however, stated in his ruling that “provisional arrangements have been made to ensure that... substantiated cases of discrimination will be dealt with in such a way as to remedy the

⁶ Hong Kong’s Court of First Instance exercises jurisdiction in civil and criminal matters. It is part of the High Court, which is the second highest court system in Hong Kong. (“The Courts”)

effects of such discrimination.” (*Equal Opportunities Commission v. Director of Education*, Section 143)

This case has demonstrated that the EOC has been willing to address gender discrimination, at least in education, on a broad scale. The EOC has also been actively investigating complaints that other Hong Kong citizens have made with regard to violations of the SDO in the employment field. Out of 1,286 complaints in regard to the SDO that the EOC received between January 1 and October 31, 2001, 424 pertained to the employment field. Of these 424 complaints, 210 are currently either under investigation or in the process of being resolved. The EOC has so far found none of the 424 complaints groundless. (“The Equal Opportunities Commission: Statistics...”)

The number of investigations undertaken by the EOC has also increased significantly since its establishment. In 2001, the EOC received 1,181 complaints concerning violations of the SDO, which is more than ten times the number of complaints it received in 1998. (“The Equal Opportunities Commission: Statistics...”) The increase in complaints is attributable to the public’s growing knowledge of the services that the EOC can provide. The EOC continues to make great strides in educating the Hong Kong public so that people know both what defines gender discrimination and where to turn for assistance. (“Equal Opportunities Commission—Vision and Mission”)

Conclusion: The Future of Gender Equalization in Education and Employment

At the time of this writing, there remain differences between the sexes in educational opportunities and experiences in Hong Kong. Girls have generally done better on the Internal Assessments and boys have done better on the Academic Aptitude Test, which indicates gender imbalances. Streaming guides females predominantly into

the arts and males into the sciences. Certain fields of study, such as mechanical, electrical, electronic and marine engineering, remain male-dominated. Finally, though predominantly female careers such as teaching and nursing have required less tertiary education than male-dominated careers, studies have indicated that in general women are becoming increasingly more educated.

There also remain great differences between the sexes in career opportunities as well. The belief that a woman's primary responsibility is still her family continues to affect her career options. Hong Kong's economic shift from manufacturing to service jobs has tended to funnel women into clerical jobs, and in some instances has forced women back into their homes. Finally, women still occupy the majority of lower paying jobs whereas men occupy the majority of higher paying jobs in both male-dominated and female-dominated occupational categories.

Hong Kong has identified its standardized examinations as being a major cause of gender discrimination in its education system. As a result of the Equal Opportunities Commission's actions, the Secondary School Placement Allocation system is now being revised. The EOC continues to make strides not only in reducing gender discrimination in schools, but in the workplace too.

Hong Kong has proven that reducing gender discrimination is a high priority. In general, Hong Kong is demonstrating an increased awareness of what constitutes gender discrimination, and it is proactively seeking gender equalization in both educational attainment and career opportunities.

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