

Creating an Enabling Environment: Government and Private Sectors

by

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Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

It is my pleasure to attend the APEC Women Leaders Network Meeting and to share with you my observations on "Creating an Enabling Environment: Government and Private Sectors". Asia as a region is undergoing rapid economic restructure and is attracting global attention on its economic prospects and social changes.

At the recent UN 23rd General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century", feminization of poverty, pay equity and equality in education seem to be common problems to many places. These problems are the same for Asia and have in all probability been exacerbated by the financial crisis that is still obvious in many areas in this region.

Under the current economic restructuring and globalization, an emerging trend in the labour market is the rise of the casualized mode of employment. Women workers are the first to bear the brunt, often working without job security in unstable and temporary employment.

Behind an affluent Hong Kong, there is a widening gap between the rich and the poor. The number of workers living at the poverty line has increased 67.4% to 360,000 in the last decade. The actual income for the 20,000 top-earning households has increased by 28% while that of the 20,000 lowest-earning households has decreased by 28% over the same period of time. There is an increase in the number for separation and divorce. By 1999, the divorce rate had grown to 20% versus 9% ten years earlier. This increased the number of female heads of households who had less economic resources.

How do we then ameliorate this situation for women in Hong Kong and elsewhere and how do we get ourselves as a community out of this situation? I'd like to approach these issues with several observations.

First, let's look at what we have and that is common to all. It is people. While well-trained and well-qualified people is an asset, untrained and unskilled people can easily turn into a liability.

Second, we know that resources available to governments in Hong Kong and the rest of Asia are scant and increase in social security payment is unlikely.

This leads me to the obvious conclusion that investment in the education and training of the individuals in our community, that is, in our human capital, is essential and prerequisite to development in human resources. And it is the creation of an enabling environment with the individuals, the government and the private sectors all participating widely in the process of making wealth and benefiting from it that will provide the answer.

The Concept of Equal Opportunities

The best way of creating an enabling framework in my mind is to apply the concept of equal opportunities. Let me illustrate this with a few very down-to-earth examples.

The classified sections of any Hong Kong newspaper up until 1996 ran advertisement, seeking applicants of a particular sex and age. They regularly sought “mature male-only” applicants for managerial and professional positions and “young female-only” applicants for low-paid clerical positions.

Indeed, even the Hong Kong Government, which should be sensitive to the importance of treating all citizens equally, sometimes failed to uphold this principle. For example, just before the anti-discrimination laws for Hong Kong were legislated for in 1995, the Labour Department was still posting advertisements for clerical positions in government departments which specified age limitations (such as : '20-35', '20-30' and even '17-24').

By allowing this environment to persist, we are performing a disservice to our community. It is perpetuating a "disabling" environment. We are crippling individuals from going on people's abilities. Progress in the larger community can only be build on the basis of fair competition and meritocracy. After all what is the point of doing well if doing badly will pay you just as much.

The basic philosophy behind the concept of equal opportunities is to create a level playing field for every individual. That is, everyone should have equal access to education, employment, services and facilities. Everyone should also have the right and fair chance to participate in the social, political and cultural life of a community. This allows an individual to develop his/her potential as fully as possible and enables and individual to rely on his/her own abilities as far as possible. Such an environment encourages competition and empowers the individual to be self reliant rather than to become dependent on the public purse.

Many leaders have come to realize that to survive and excel in the new millennium a community has to focus on getting the best talents. Bias of any kind is going to hinder development and is a luxury a community can ill afford.

In the employment world, the concept of equal opportunities is about using human resources effectively. It means matching the right person with the right job. By

tapping into the largest pool of available talents, employers can enhance the quality of their staff. Successful companies around the world now recognize that equal opportunities practices enhance the competitive edge of companies and lead to business growth. Both overseas and local experiences have shown that promoting equal opportunities practices achieve greater worker loyalty, reduce turnover and absenteeism, and improve creativity and productivity.

For social and economic development to take place, there are good reasons both for the government and the private sectors to provide individuals with an enabling environment. Nothing is more important than developing the human capital which is the key to sustaining development.

It was for these reasons that I proposed the enactment of equal opportunities laws and the establishment of a human rights and equal opportunities commission in 1993 to 1995 when I was a legislator in Hong Kong. The Equal Opportunities Commission of Hong Kong ("The EOC") was established in 1996 and is now responsible for implementing three pieces of anti-discrimination legislation. They are the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance and the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance. We have the dual task of promoting equal opportunities and eliminating discrimination.

Education and Training: A Key to Women's Empowerment

Education is of utmost importance in the creating of an enabling environment for women. Education, irrespective of who is receiving it, contributes to personal development. It can raise income, improve health and increase productivity. There is a growing consensus that when women are the recipients of good education, training and work, the benefits become very apparent. Educated mothers know about nutrition and how to act during emergencies. Educated women tend to have fewer children, slowing population growth. When a woman gains access to better employment due to better education, their families benefit through higher earnings. As a result, there is a multiplying effect that educated mothers could bring to the community through their family role. Educated and motivated women become an active catalyst and agent for change and development.

Many top economists now consider money spent on educating girls one of the best investments for development. Despite this belief, closing the education gap between boys and girls is still a global issue. Sometimes, sadly, after closing one gap we find another. The path of equality between men and women is often beset with twisted logic.

In August 1999, the EOC issued a report on the Secondary School Places Allocation System. This was done under our formal investigation powers. It made the finding that, while both boys and girls were affected unfairly by the system on the ground of sex, more girls, however, were adversely affected. The result came about through the systematic scaling down of girls' attained scores and scaling up of boys' scores, and through separate gender queuing and the use of restrictive quota allocation against girls.

This system has been used by the Education Department for over 20 years and has always been regarded as sacrosanct until 1999. For the first time in 1998, the Education Department released the banding results of individual students which enabled the students to compare their scores and major differences in treatment between boys and girls were found. A series of complaints to the EOC resulted in a wide ranging investigation undertaken by the EOC. It took us a year to complete.

The Education Department claims that equality means equal number of boys and girls in each school band and in entering the best schools. The Education Department also argues that boys mature later than girls and perform less well than girls in school examination. Therefore boys require special measures in the form of scaling up of their scores and being given preference when allocating secondary school places. The irony is that not that long ago girls did not even go to school and, when they began to beat the boys in the same game, the rules of the game were changed to systematically keep the girls down. With a bit of twisted logic, affirmative action or positive discrimination has been applied in favour of the boys.

We have found in our work that very often we are not aware of deep seated prejudices embedded in systems which have been in practice for many years. Systemic discrimination penalizes many people sometimes even without them knowing it. The problems relating to the Hong Kong education system is a case in point.

A survey conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission (report released in July 1999) showed that about 85% of co-educational schools had restricted the study of Design & Technology to boys and Home Economics to girls. This restriction in our view contravened our Sex Discrimination law. The EOC does not agree with the practice of streaming students into different subject classes by gender, as this would bar boys and girls from access to the same curricula and would intensify gender stereotyping. The situation has improved since we pointed out the phenomenon. But the impact of this anomaly must be seen against the demand for IT competency in the 21st century.

Information Technology: Will It Narrow The Gap?

In this day and age, information technology ("IT") has great impact on our lives. In promoting and popularizing the use of IT, the interests of disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities and women, cannot be ignored. Essential information, services and transactions will increasingly be delivered and transacted electronically. Women who know how to use the computer can surf the net in their spare time to broaden their knowledge and undertake transactions. They can even start a business on the net at home while taking care of their families. Indeed a basic knowledge of IT is essential to securing jobs these days.

The enabling environment can be enhanced and created by the use of an enabling tool such as IT and IT can be used to narrow the gap. Against this background, the Equal Opportunities Commission has started a campaign called "IT for AW". We have been advocating training for women by the public and the private sectors. For instance, it would be desirable for government to operate training courses, e-centres or

computer kiosks at community centres in close proximity to where people live. It is also particularly important for the private sector to assume the responsibility of providing in-house IT training to women to avoid a major displacement or retrenchment of those who do not know how to use IT.

Funding Policy: sensitivity to women's needs

I am aware of an Asian Development Bank loan programme for the education of boys and girls in Indonesia. With a view to ensuring equality between boys and girls, it is a condition that 50% of the loan must be applied for the benefit of girls in education.

Similarly governments can consider using funding conditions to direct a policy. Several areas come to mind immediately.

In attempting to reduce its welfare budget, the government's goal is to attract women in poverty away from welfare and into employment. But if their earned income is more or less the same as the welfare subsidy, there is little incentive to work. Women cannot be made to feel poorer by working or to feel that they cannot afford to work. The only answer to this situation is to have government change its policy on public assistance. To encourage women to work, public assistance should be reduced progressively and retained in part as a subsidy making it worthwhile for individuals to work.

In today's world, women are playing dual roles: as workers in the labour market and as carers in the families. For mothers, one of the biggest barriers to employment is the lack of flexible and good quality child care facilities. To encourage mothers to remain in the workforce, the hours and number of creche programmes should be extended. Further, child care facilities should be located near places where mothers live and where they work. Employers in the private sector should be encouraged to establish workplace nurseries. Hitherto, the expense required for setting up these services has been regarded as prohibitive and the government could consider subsidies, benefits, loans or tax incentives to encourage the employers to establish these centers.

Another consideration government should make is the way in which they spend money to stimulate the economy during fiscal downturn. Most governments put their money in the construction and infrastructure industries, and these mainly benefit the male work force. The government should consider spending money on female-dominated jobs as well as training, programme on small loans for women.

Mainstreaming of Women Policy : a matter of definition

For centuries, men see themselves the norm and women as deviation from the norm. Society - and governments - take for granted that men are the rule and women the exception to the rule.

Most of us, even those who cry loudly about women's rights, recognize that men and women are, by definition, different. But the differences, and the way they are

expressed, have by and large been defined by a male dominated society. Policy makers (male dominated) did not used to see anything wrong in sacking pregnant women or paying women less. They never looked at a problem from the female perspective and hence the problem.

The problem with the political and economic empowerment of women in Hong Kong, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, is that they have minimal participation in political and economic decision making. In May 2000, there were only 5 women among the 25 principal government officials in Hong Kong. The percentage is low. Only 16% of Hong Kong Legislators are women even though 47.7% of registered voters are women. Another study conducted by Hong Kong's EOC last year showed that of the over 3,500 persons serving on Government's advisory committees and statutory bodies, less than 16% were female members.

Women on the corporate boards are even fewer. In 1999, a survey of companies that make up the Hong Kong Stock Index the Hang Seng Index showed that only 25 of the 452 board positions were held by women.

There is growing pressure that governments must set up a mechanism to entrench the rights of women and to ensure that all government policies and programmes assess their impact on gender. This is mainstreaming, women's perspective. It is redefining policies and programmes to ensure they provide fair outcome for both men and women and not only dwell on men as the norm.

Recently the Hong Kong Government has proposed the setting up of a Women's Commission. We support the proposal but to ensure its usefulness, it must be established at a very high level and must be politically accountable. It "is a start in expediting the process of equalizing and balancing the perspectives.

Towards A Win-Win Partnership

Let me conclude by describing a project that the EOC has set in train. We believe that it makes good business sense for businesses to subscribe to equal opportunity practices. Together with the Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency, we hope to persuade businesses in Hong Kong to become accredited as a socially accountable business through the SA800 Certification Scheme. The certification will provide credibility to the businesses, as well as entrenching good management practices in areas such as equal opportunities, environmental protection and others. I also hope to create incentives for business by wedding the SA8000 Certification to the government contract tendering system, that, for government to recognize good practice through bonus point awards or preferential scales when selecting contractors.