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WOMEN'S ROLES AND THE CHANGING FAMILY IN HONG KONG

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## **Women's Roles and the Changing Family in Hong Kong**

Chinese women's roles have traditionally been defined in the context of the family. Throughout her life cycle, a woman is supposed to follow her father when she is young, her husband when she gets married, and her son when she gets old. As a wife, a woman's place is at home. She takes care of internal matters while the husband takes care of external matters. As a mother, she is responsible for the care and upbringing of her children. Her status is threatened when she is unable to bear a male offspring to her husband. Up through 1960s, the lack of a son was often accepted as one of the reasons for a husband to get a concubine or to divorce the wife in Hong Kong. Despite changes in the marriage laws in the Chinese Republic in 1911 and the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese customary marriage was carried over from the Imperial Qing Dynasty laws and customs currently used in 1843 when Hong Kong was ceded by China to Britain. Even up to this date, the inability to bear a son still poses a strong pressure on the wife regardless of her level of education or economic status.

### **Socioeconomic Development**

The status of women in the family was raised along with the overall economic prosperity of Hong Kong achieved in the 1970s, partly contributed by the increase of women's participation in the labor force. These changes have improved the objective indicators of women's status, such as health, marriage and children, education, employment and social equality. For example, the

female life expectancy in 1985 is 79.2 years. The maternal mortality rate in 1986 is 0.03 per thousand, a drop from 0.16 per thousand in 1977. Illiteracy for women dropped from 22% in 1966 to 12.5% in 1986 (Hong Kong Government, 1986). The government provides nine years of free and compulsory education for all children. In a global comparison of 99 countries using 20 indicators on sexual equality, women in Hong Kong scored on the top half. Compared to other Asian countries, the status of women in Hong Kong ranked high after Japan, and close to Singapore and Taiwan, reflecting the overall economic prosperity of these countries (Population Crisis Committee, 1988). These objective indicators only project an apparently high status for women partly by virtue of the economic development of the countries, but are insensitive to the discrepancies in attainment among women from different socioeconomic background and to the more subtle forms of discrimination in terms of roles and attitudes.

Traditionally, a woman's status in the Chinese family was largely based on her fertility, especially the reproduction of male offsprings. Ironically, a major source of improvement for women's status in the family came as a result of the successful family planning campaign in Hong Kong since the 1970s. Household characteristics have changed together with a lower crude birth rate of 1.3% in 1986, down from 1.73% in 1977. Fertility of women in the under 20 and the 20-24 age groups decreased significantly, while there is a slight increase in fertility among the 30-34 age group. Total live births by mothers decreased from 80,022 in 1977 to 71,620 in 1986. The average household size was 3.7, compared

with 4.2 in 1976 (Hong Kong Government, 1986). Large size families were on the decline with a rapid decrease in the proportion of household with six persons or more. Around 60% of the households in 1986 were in the form of one unextended nuclear family. The median monthly household income has risen from \$1,425 in 1976 to \$5,160 in 1986 (\$2,255 at 1976 prices). This increase may in part be attributed to the greater participation of women in the labor force.

The percentage of working-age women in active employment increased from 43.6% in 1976 to 51.2% in 1986 (Hong Kong Government, 1986). The median age of the female labor force has increased from 28.1 to 30.3, reflecting the trend that more women are getting married later in life and will continue to work after marriage. Women's increased participation in the labor force reflects an economic necessity and a means for upward social mobility for many lower-class families. However, the percentage of married women in the labor force is still relatively low at about 36%. The decision to have children is directly related to women's choice of work (Wong, 1987). Having a young child between 0 to 3 decreases the probability that a married woman will take in-firm work. However, she will usually assume or partially assume work as an out-firm worker when the child grows older. The strong relationship between limited choice of work and having young children reflects the inadequate social support for working mothers. The lack of low-cost quality child care facilities restricts woman's opportunity for paid employment. It is also a source of conflict for women who opted to work outside of the

home.

The extension of women's roles into the work place has not relieved her responsibilities in the household. Instead, a number of social studies have pointed to the burden of dual careers for women in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association and Hong Kong Shue Yan College, 1982; The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong, 1990). Many working mothers experience conflicts between work and family life. Despite her venture outside the home, the household responsibilities still fall on the wife. Most of the traditional "woman's jobs" at home have to be carried by the wife whether she has a full-time job outside or not. Few husbands would participate in the responsibility of child care despite more of them, especially among the more educated, expressing the opinion that these tasks should be shared. Many women believe it is their responsibility and feel guilty for asking their husbands to help.

The burden of a married woman's workload has not been addressed by the provision of adequate child care in the community. The disintegration of the extended family network in the urban setting has broken down the traditional support network without replacing it with alternative child care facilities. The quality, location and fee of child care centers are prohibitive. Many middle-class and professional families take advantage of the relatively low wages of imported maids from the Philippines and Thailand. For working class mothers, children may be placed in paid caretakers' home or even in villages in Mainland China where the costs of care are lower. Some children may just be left alone

at home. Cases of child neglect resulting in deaths and injuries because mothers have to work away from home have aroused public outcry but little alternative resources have been provided. The call for better child care support is one of the main concerns voiced by women's groups in Hong Kong in the 1990s.

The rapid socioeconomic development in Hong Kong has in turn isolated from the main stream women who stay home as housewives. Full-time housewives often feel out of touch with the society. In a study on working-class housewives (Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association, 1984), most of the respondents found their lives to be dull and routine, and their social circle to be narrow. They perceived their status to be inferior to that of the working members of the family and/or other women in paid employment. The provision of services aimed at promoting women's development has not received much support or attention until recently, even though women's groups have advocated for women's empowerment for the past ten years (Cheung, 1989).

#### Legislative Changes Affecting the Family Women

Apart from socioeconomic changes since the 1970s, legal protection of the status of women in the family was enacted in a series of ordinances passed as late as the 1960-70s. Under the Imperial Qing Dynasty laws and customs, men may take concubines legally, daughters have no right to inheritance, and married women cannot hold property or enter into contract. Whereas traditional Chinese culture has been more resistant to changes and has retained feudal remnants from imperial China, legislation brought about by the colonial British government has been heavily influ-

enced by English laws. Some of the protective measures accorded to women were enacted pursuant to similar amendments to the English law. The passage of the Marriage Reform Bill 1970 reflects the inertia of social pressure and the greater influence of English legal changes on family law. As early as 1948, a Committee on Chinese Law and Custom was set up by the Home Affairs Secretary. The Committee made its recommendations in the 1953 Strickland Report to review the antiquated Chinese law of marriages. It took 17 years before the Government drafted the Marriage Reform Bill and introduced it for debate in the Legislative Council in 1970. The impetus came from similar bills related to reforms in family law in England on which many of the Hong Kong matrimonial ordinances were based.

In addition to the Marriage Reform Ordinance, there were the Matrimonial Causes Ordinance, Married persons Status Ordinance, Intestates' Estate Ordinance, Matrimonial Proceedings, and Property Ordinance. These legislative changes abolished the validity of Chinese customary marriages and open marriages, and established that marriages should be monogamous and registered. Similarly, divorce should be based on mutual consent and regulated through registration. A daughter's rights to equal shares of inheritance, and a married woman's independent status, such as the right to hold property, were established in these ordinances, although the independent status of a married woman in terms of tax collection was not recognized until 1989. Previously, for the purpose of salaries tax and personal assessment, the Inland Revenue Ordinance regarded the income of a wife to be the income



of her husband and tax was chargeable under the husband's name. Only beginning in the mid 1980s were married women allowed to apply to retain their own maiden surnames for registration purposes such as in the application for passports. Whereas traditional Chinese customs despised the law and have relied on Confucian ethics and sets of virtues to determine the family as a social unit, the English law has instituted the court as having the jurisdiction to determine the nature and existence of the rights and liabilities of members of the family. These parallel social forces have propelled women's modernization on the one hand, and dragged them behind with conflict and guilt on the other.

The passage of these laws has been championed by the relentless effort of the only female legislator in the Legislative Council at that time. While these laws were supported by the majority of the legislators, the dissenting views of a few Chinese male legislators illustrate the underlying social attitudes often found in the Chinese community. In a speech against equal pay, one legislator said:

"In the cases of thousands of clerical workers of government, one must bear in mind that there is an inbuilt factor in a male clerk's salary for him to support his wife and children...This made the original differences between the clerical grades of male and female staff. Surely the responsibilities of a male clerk supporting a wife and two children and those of a single young lady are different... The difference...originates from the fact that the male clerk must support his wife and

family, whereas the female clerk presumably need not. This is the way our society functions. However, if the female clerk can substantiate the contention that she is supporting her husband and children, I think it would be fair to raise her pay to the male clerk's level. There are merits in matriarchy" (Hong Kong Hansard, 13th March, 1969, p. 147).

Even in the debate on the Marriage Reform Bill, one Chinese male legislator objected to the abolition of monogamy by questioning whether monogamy was "so manifestly a superior institution to the traditional Chinese institution of marriage that we should completely deny the right to people to opt out of it if they so wish?" He further challenged his female colleague in the Legislature who advocated the bill by claiming that his intention was to protect all women: "...whereas she would wish to protect the rights of one class of women, namely those fortunate enough to be principal wives, I would protect all women, including those that do not have the good fortune, who otherwise, if we pass this law, would be deprived of the opportunity of having an honorable and a recognized status" (Hong Kong Hansard, 17th June, 1970, p.737).

#### Cultural Lag in Women's Development

The cultural lag between changes in the objective social conditions on the one hand, and traditional social attitudes on the other creates conflict between the genders as well as for women themselves. The objective indicators have often been cited to prove that equality for women has already been achieved and

there is no need for feminist movements in Hong Kong. However, the prevailing attitudes toward women still subjugate them to a lower status in subtle ways. For example, given limited resources in the family, older daughters have to give up the studies to support their younger brothers' education (Tang, 1981). Even for women who have completed higher education, they often lack self-confidence and aspirations (Chow, 1988). Whereas women have expanded their roles beyond the family, men have maintained their traditional roles without concomitant adjustment. Marital conflicts have become more exposed whereas they may have been covered up by virtue of women's tolerance of the situation.

#### Domestic Violence

Many serious problems faced by women in the family may only surface after awareness has been raised by women's groups. One such example is the issue of domestic violence.

Wife beating has been taken for granted in many Chinese families even in modern Hong Kong. The toleration of this form of violence on women has been attributed to traditional cultural norms in which the wife is the property of the husband and should submit to his domination. With the rising status of women, this form of violence is challenged.

The issue of domestic violence has been raised by women's groups in the early 1980s. They point out that the lack of social service, economic security and legal protection for battered wives renders women helpless and powerless. The protection of the privacy and honor of the family would keep such cases from being exposed. Battered women are reluctant to seek help outside the

family. Family members would often advise the wife to tolerate her fate. Even police officers who are called to intervene the violence tend to turn a blind eye in order to distance themselves from what they consider to be internal family matters.

In their campaign on domestic violence, women's groups has called for the establishment of women's refuge. At the beginning, the Social Welfare Department denied that there was such a need based on the statistics of their clientele. The campaign by women's groups brought to light hidden cases which were not identified by the inadequate government statistics. Through these efforts, the first shelter for battered wives in Hong Kong was set up in 1985. The Domestic Violence Bill was introduced in 1986 to give the victim of domestic violence the right to claim an injunction from a district court on a simple application, to forbid the molestation of the applicant or a child, exclude the batterer from the home, or if the victim has been shut out, require the batterer to permit the applicant to remain in the matrimonial home. The injunction provides a rapid course of action without the need for divorce proceedings (Hong Kong Hansard, 9th July, 1986).

The eventual success of campaigns like this on behalf of women were not based on issues which emphasized women's rights. Support may be seen as a form of protective measure for women as victims. Although legislation may have instituted more permanent forms of protection for women, changes in social attitudes require continuous advocacy and public education. Even the image of the women's movement and women's groups suffer from negative

stereotypes which alienate many men and women. Feminism often carries the image of militancy and destruction of the family system with which Chinese women do not identify (Cheung, 1989). This threatening image reflects the lack of synchronization in the changing roles of women and men in the family, where women's increasing independence and competence pose as challenges to men's authority. The compatibility of these changes is a crucial prerequisite for the development of gender equality in the Chinese family, and an important perspective to consider in gender studies.

The discrepancy in role changes between genders may be illustrated by a study on 114 married women aged 21-50 (Shek and Yeung, 1986). Using the Repertory Grid method, the role and attributes of the subjects were compared with those of their husbands, as well as women and men in a number of time cohorts. The results showed that the roles and status of women in the 1980s were seen to have undergone many changes as compared to the past. However, women were still perceived to be less competent and less able to fight for their own right. While contemporary women were considered to have gained higher social status, the subjects found themselves to have less power in the family and little social participation. They held a lower self-esteem of themselves in comparison to their husbands who they regard as having higher social status, more knowledgeable about the society, more adventurous, but less open-minded.

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