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Hong Kong Focus

A city of closed minds?

By Simon Parry (HK Edition)

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A major survey on social attitudes in Hong Kong paints a picture of a wealthy, cosmopolitan city with surprisingly - and in some cases disturbingly - traditional attitudes. Is it a fair picture, or are we really more tolerant than the research suggests? Simon Parry reports.

We disapprove of single mothers. We frown upon couples who live together before they marry. We believe women should do most of the homework, even if they have a nine-to-five job. And we tut disapprovingly at the sight of homosexuals.

For a city that prides itself on being cosmopolitan, modern, progressive and liberal, the findings of a comprehensive Women's Commission survey into attitudes on gender and public morality are something of a reality check.

Detailed interviews carried out with more than 3,000 people earlier this year found that beneath the veneer of our high-rise, high-tech lifestyles, the place we market as "Asia's World City" is a place where traditional views and prejudices still hold sway.

We are, judging by the survey's findings, a city of "young fogeys" where the conservative outlook of the older generation is being passed on to the next generation unquestioned with the liberal attitudes that characterise other world cities mystifyingly absent.

Take homosexuality for instance. More than 72 percent of interviewees said they found homosexuality unacceptable. Only 8.5 percent of men and 13.7 percent of women said they found it acceptable - and what was striking was that even among younger interviewees, tolerance levels were low. In the 18-34 age group, 66.8 percent of men and 64.1 percent of women said they did not accept homosexuality.

Then there is the question of single mothers. More than 45 percent of men and 54 percent of women said it was unacceptable for a woman to have a baby when she had no intention of getting married. Again, among younger respondents, 33 percent of men and 48 percent of women still found it unacceptable.

When it came to marriage, 89 percent of women were willing to marry an older man and the same percentage of men said they were willing to accept a younger companion, but the notion of women marrying younger men and men marrying older women is still frowned upon.

Divorcees are still at least partially stigmatised with one in four women and 19.5 percent of men saying it was unacceptable to marry a divorced person. And only 27 percent of men and 29 percent of women accepted divorce as a solution for married couples with children who could not live happily together.

The most significant findings of the survey, as far as the government body behind it is concerned, are those on women's place in society. Here, researchers found that most people still viewed women as the "homemakers" and expected them to take care of most of the household and child care chores.

Interviewees listed women's household duties as child care, cleaning, laundry, shopping, cooking and caring for elderly family members while men's duties came down to simply supervising domestic helpers, minor household repairs and paying bills.

Interestingly, however, a degree of gender equality exists on one level at least: More than 80 percent of people believe that both men and women should contribute to household income rather than rely on the man as the sole breadwinner.

"This shows us that things are getting tougher for women in Hong Kong," said commission member Ayesha Macpherson. "They need to take up the responsibility to contribute to family finance but also to continue to take care of the home."

"I think our survey results found that while there have been some changes in views of the role of women in the family, there are still traditional views that are very strong, and that is a little surprising."

"We would have thought that Hong Kong, regarding itself as an international business centre, would be quite forward-thinking in its attitudes. Certainly there are some forward-thinking aspects but there are still well-entrenched traditional views."

"For example the view that housework is still primarily women's function is still very

strong. Women are still seen strongly as the homemakers."

Ms Macpherson said she believed the results of the survey indicated a need for greater gender awareness in Hong Kong and argued that the process of making people more aware should start in schools or even in kindergartens.

"We don't have sufficient gender awareness in Hong Kong and we are hoping that the government and the Women's Commission can work together on this," she said. "Gender education needs to start right from the beginning for children at primary school level or even earlier.

Asked how the subject could be taught to young children, Ms Macpherson said they should be taught from an early age to avoid gender stereotyping. "For example, there are some traditional roles or views of women that could be portrayed differently through school materials.

"I think we should carefully review the education material that is being used in Hong Kong to see that gender stereotyping is removed. A very senior company executive, for instance, could be male or female and a homemaker too could be a male or female." Ms McPherson said the responses to questions on homosexuality and single parents also showed that they were not very well accepted in Hong Kong society.

More should be done, she said, but asked if those subjects too should be addressed at school, she replied: "That involves a lot of issues in terms of morality so we haven't thought through that aspect yet."

Anthropologist **Joseph Bosco** of Hong Kong's Chinese University said the survey findings should not necessarily be taken at face value - particularly those relating to attitudes on homosexuality which he said did not reflect the opinions of his students.

"I mentioned these figures to some students in a tutorial and they all thought there must be something wrong," he said. "I find that most of my students have very little opinion about homosexuality, and they are completely devoid of the 'disgust' that is common in Judeo-Christian countries."

He said he would be "very surprised" if people in Hong Kong had stronger views on homosexuality than people in the US, for instance.

"People are much more nonplussed here," he said. "People are not really bothered by it whereas in the US, you have much more polarised opinion on the subject. A student here did a thesis on a gay church a few years ago and none of his contemporaries thought it was controversial or 'yukky'. It was just a topic.

"In Chinese society there is a stereotypical story where the son tells his parents 'I'm gay' and they say 'That doesn't matter. Do what you want - just get married and have a kid. The most important thing is to carry on the family line. It's a fundamental Chinese

attitude."

The problem with the Women's Commission survey, Bosco said, was that it forced people to make judgements on topics where they might hold no strong opinion in either direction. "When you put people on the spot, they are forced to make a choice," he said.

"It is like elections. I've heard people say at election times 'We don't normally argue this much - it's only during elections that we disagree'."

Bosco argued: "Asking people about their preferences with a survey is not a very reliable way of knowing about culture. It is convenient, so many disciplines rely on it, but it is poor science.

"Such public opinion polling is useful when the questions are asked in different places or over time so we can make comparisons, and even then, we need to go deeper to understand what people mean by their answers. But the answers to this survey convey a false concreteness that is misleading.

"Surveys force people to make artificial choices. What do people really mean when the question says they 'found homosexual relationship unacceptable'? The question forces people to make a binary decision, but they may not feel very strongly about it."

Tommy Jai, spokesperson for Rainbow Action, a gay rights group in Hong Kong, agreed, saying: "I don't buy the results. The survey made a very general, very vague question. I actually found it strange that they asked this question. It made we wonder what they want to prove and what their agenda is."

Jai pointed out that the Hong Kong government did its own survey more than 10 years ago on attitudes to homosexuality. "They found that most people didn't accept homosexuality," he said.

"So, funnily enough, the government came to the conclusion that because most people didn't accept homosexuality they shouldn't pass the law (against discrimination). Of course if most people accepted it, we wouldn't need a law. It is because most people don't accept it that we need a law to protect against discrimination."

In the intervening years, Jai said he believed Hong Kong people in general had become more tolerant. However he said the factions fighting their attempts to get greater legal recognition in terms of housing and discrimination protection were becoming stronger. "People are more accepting but the conservative faction is getting more organised against gay rights," he said. We have been surprised at how organised they are."

Whether it intended to or not, the Women's Commission survey has opened the door to a debate on societal attitudes in Hong Kong that go far beyond the role of women and whether or not men do enough housework.

Ms Macpherson admits the survey has been an imperfect process. "It is just a particular point in time," she said. "What I think will be very useful and what we plan to do is repeat this survey in a few years' time and keep doing it periodically.

"That will be very useful and interesting. It will tell us not only what people's perceptions are right now but also how they are changing and what the changing trends are."

For the time being, however, she believes there is enough evidence in the first survey of its kind to indicate that attitudes in Hong Kong are not moving with the times - and need to unless the city is to be held back, at least in terms of the role women play.

"With some of our attitudes changing and others not catching up, it could hold back women's development in Hong Kong. Eventually, that could affect our economic development," Ms Macpherson argued.

"There is an old Chinese saying that says 'Women hold up half the sky'. If you hold back the people who hold up half of the sky, how can you unleash the full potential of the whole population?"

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