

On Mother's Day, let's focus on better working hours and parental leave rather than just good wishes ^[1]

Alice Wu says putting mothers on a pedestal while saddling them with a gender pay gap and lack of time with their children hardly makes for a happy Mother's Day

Author: Wu, Alice

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EXCERPTS

Mothers are most deserving of our gratitude and admiration. The sacrifices they made and continue to make are enormous. As many mothers would say, there's nothing quite as rewarding as motherhood. There's no reason we shouldn't take their word for it, but yet, we know Hong Kong has one of the lowest birth rates in the world.

So, obviously, there are a lot of unspoken issues that need addressing. We must recognise that we put mothers on a pedestal every year, and yet we also express our sympathies and shake our heads at the horror show working mothers call life, and then we do nothing.

We recognise the crushing demands of motherhood but we do little to alleviate mothers of these demands. We allow schools to demand higher levels of parental involvement while we let their employers keep them at work longer.

Previous administrations talked about the importance of and efforts in getting women to join or rejoin the workforce and, yet, women are faced with a rising pay gap. The overall gap between men and women in Hong Kong went up HK\$500 between 2004 and 2014. For post-secondary degree holders, the gender wage gap increased from 25 per cent to 30 per cent.

Compound these realities with motherhood and it is no wonder that more mothers are giving up their careers – leaving a workforce that does not value them and discourages their participation. In the 35-39 age group, marriage alone takes 30 per cent of women out of the workforce. We celebrate the level of women's educational attainment and turn a blind eye to docking their pay.

Just a few months after taking office, Hong Kong's first woman chief executive, Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, spoke at length at a conference about the support needed for working women. "As a working mother, I firmly believe that the government should help women enter, or remain, in the workforce, creating conditions that allow them to maintain a work-life balance," she said. Not enough time has passed since she made that speech, but there must be more the government can do to remove barriers for women.

When the main reason for women not working full time is the need to be caretakers at home, it makes sense that the government should aim to enhance childcare and elderly services support. It would make even better sense, though, if the government were to tackle the notorious long working hours that afflict both men and women in the city.

If a 2015 survey showed that 17 per cent of working mothers spent less than an hour a day with their family, we need not rack our brains to understand why asking mothers to work outside the home is cruel. No matter how much praise we heap on them on Mother's Day, we as a society continue to sanction parenthood penalties. Maximum working hours would allow working parents – and not only mothers – to be with their families. No matter how many tax incentives the government gives for child-bearing, it has failed to see the everyday but unnecessary indignities of having children in this city.

Lam said, “In the workplace, a family-friendly environment is essential in creating equal opportunities for men and women. To that end, the government has legislated numerous employment benefits, including rest days, and maternity leave and paternity leave.” But Hong Kong’s maternity leave is less than the International Labour Organisation’s recommendation of 14 weeks. When the Equal Opportunities Commission reports that one in five women experienced workplace discrimination during pregnancy, maternity leave or in the first year after giving birth, the government must be aware that laws alone are not enough. Becoming a mother hurts careers immediately and permanently.

A lot of mothers, like my own, are indeed saintlike, but our appreciation, admiration and celebration of them shouldn’t require that they actually be made real martyrs, relinquishing all their dreams, ambitions, freedom, right to equal pay, respect, sleep and personal fulfilment.

Alice Wu is a political consultant and a former associate director of the Asia Pacific Media Network at UCLA

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