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## Hong Kong Men

# Free to be who you are

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**Catherine Ng**

The Men's Rights Concern Group made some good points in its recent plea for a government-funded commission to help the "embattled" male population.

Gender roles are, indeed, too rigidly defined in Hong Kong. The domestic sphere is still a female domain; 99 per cent of homemakers are women. And while 70 per cent of never-married men and women are in the labour force, the figures are very different for those who are or have been married. In the married cases, 75 per cent of men are working, compared with 45 per cent of women, suggesting that some women drop out of the labour market after marriage.

This might be due in part to the fact that, with or without a job, women are responsible for housework and the care of children and elderly relatives.

A government survey looking at how people use their time found that only 7 per cent of working men were responsible for 60 per cent or more of household chores – compared with 25 per cent of working women. In families with domestic helpers, it is the women who manage them.

Besides the fact that public and private domains are dominated by different sexes, there is also serious gender segregation in some occupations. For example, women dominate the secretarial field, while plant and machine operators, and assemblers, are mostly men.

The men's concern group is right to call for a more accepting attitude among the population towards men's choices. There is no reason why men cannot be homemakers and/or secretaries. I once read a letter in a newspaper from a man complaining about gender stereotyping in Hong Kong. He had asked a waiter in an upmarket restaurant where the baby-changing room was, only to be told: "Why don't you ask your wife to do it?" We need to change such attitudes.

The women's movement has been fighting against discrimination issues such as sexual harassment, a glass ceiling, the old-boys' network and low wages. Women also want an equal opportunity to enter and thrive in male-dominated professions. These issues are still prevalent, even after two decades of hard work. So, it is high time that men began fighting for their rights to be whoever they want. Expect it to be a long battle.

Men also need counselling on psychological issues, as pointed out by the group. There are those who feel a great sense of job insecurity when they see more and more women

entering the workforce. Some feel a loss of identity as more women step out of the role of the “second sex”. Some believe their masculinity is being diminished when there are fewer of the “weaker sex” – those who want to be protected and taken care of, like a fragile porcelain vase.

Some men are angry because they feel that women want to have the cake and eat it, too; they want to be treated as the weaker sex and, at the same time, share power with men. This leads to confusion, with men not knowing what women really want.

These are very legitimate issues for men. The Men’s Rights Concern Group has challenges ahead, and it will be doing men a great service if it takes seriously its responsibility to liberalize men’s identities. It may want to work towards: redefining masculinity; promoting basic rights for everyone, as well as free personal choices; helping insecure men build self-esteem; and educating the public to respect each individual as someone who deserves every opportunity to develop his or her full potential.

I look forward to a future in which men and women are free to be who they are. Women’s groups should support these kinds of men’s organisations, because both agendas look incredibly similar.

Isn’t it interesting that women and men have so much in common? Perhaps this is the reason why men should support women’s fight for equal rights as well.

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