

Other Voices

Women's rights are in the interest of all

Catherine Ng

Saturday was International Women's Day, and the recent Edison Chen Koon-hei sex-photos scandal has highlighted the importance of privacy rights for women.

Women are frequently perceived as sex objects. However, they are also generally allowed less sexual freedom and judged by higher moral standards. When women's privacy rights are violated, they suffer more adverse consequences and face more severe public condemnation.

Some columnists (mostly male) suggested that now the public had seen nude pictures of Gillian Chung Yan-tung having sex, she had no right to be outraged about people secretly filming her changing clothes backstage a year ago.

Later, when Chen apologized and said that the photos were private and not intended to be shown to anyone, many realized that both his and the women's privacy rights had been grossly infringed.

In a liberal society, how two adults seek sexual pleasure in private should stay private.

In Hong Kong, women continue to be the "weaker" sex in terms of self determination, social status, economic independence, and decision-making power at work and in politics. Men dominate the public discourse and spaces, and many of them lack an understanding of women's situations.

Women form the majority of some of society's most marginalised sectors. Many are still not assured of basic human rights.

These rights include economic justice, safety (that is, freedom from violence and abuse), health, as well as political and sexual rights. The HER Fund has been making annual grants to projects that aim to improve the quality of women's lives in Hong Kong. Most of the 30 projects the fund has supported in the past four years have targeted women in poverty, low-income earners, single mothers, sex workers, migrant workers and new arrivals.

Many of the projects have tried to enable women to attain the resources and capacities to help themselves – for example, self-employment through worker co-operatives.

Some projects have promoted personal growth for disadvantaged women through art and performance.

The fund has also supported research on a wide range of topics dealing with neglected women. For example, one study surveyed sex workers on occupational health and safety issues in their industry. Other projects have aimed to combat sexual harassment and violence against women, which is a serious problem in Hong Kong.

A lot more work needs to be done to help women build self-esteem and dignity, and to defend their basic rights.

When women can more freely enjoy life's various options and develop their potential, men benefit too, since they will also be less constrained by traditional gender stereotypes and sex roles.

Promoting human rights for women does not take rights away from men.

This is a point worth remembering.

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