

Women

IN HONG KONG



Edited by
Veronica Pearson
Benjamin K. P. Leung

10 The Women's Movement at the Crossroads

Tsang Gar-yin

Before discussing the women's movement in Hong Kong, one may ask the question, is there indeed a women's movement to speak of? The answer to that question clearly depends on one's understanding of the meaning of 'women's movement' and similarly, 'feminism'. According to one recent account, the women's movement in Hong Kong should try to understand the root cause of patriarchy (meaning a system of male dominance), and fight it on a personal and structural level (Ho, 1990). Ho uses this definition to classify all women's groups across the spectrum. However, labels like 'conservative' and 'radical' are always controversial; they can be oversimplistic and at times deceptive.¹ As the following account will show, the women's movement in Hong Kong is simply too young to invite an authoritative balance sheet.

With this in mind, a somewhat looser definition of 'women's movement' will be used in this chapter. It will signify the activities of groups, made up largely of women, which are concerned with the disadvantaged position of women in society, and who wish to bring about a significant improvement in the situation of women. The objective is to describe the diversity in methods, concerns, and targets, and to analyse the action of women's groups in Hong Kong as they have evolved over the years. The purpose is to shed light on some of the difficulties as well as highlight the achievements of the women's movement. Any evaluation is offered in a spirit of exploration and tentative proposition.

The Development of a Women's Movement

The formation of women's concern groups and, more recently, a more self-conscious women's movement in Hong Kong mirrored some of the major stages of the feminist movement in the West. It started from a similar revulsion against glaring

maltreatment of women, moved onto a confident liberal outlook criticizing gender inequalities in public and private lives, then to a more fundamental, structural approach to gender subordination and its transformation. It was very like the Western version of feminist history, spanning the suffrage movement to second-wave liberal feminism with the intervention of radical and socialist feminism following (Oakley, 1980; Bouchier, 1983). There are, of course, certain features peculiar to the local situation.

As Benjamin Leung's chapter on women and social change shows, the colonial system, and the space for political and social reform have only recently faced the prospect of change. Also, there has not been a strong labour movement or civil rights movement (the two features that contributed to the strength of feminism in the United Kingdom and United States) during most of the post-war years. Together they explain why the women's movement has made little headway in terms of policy, ideology, and organizational strength. The pressing political questions of the transition of Hong Kong to Chinese rule in 1997 also seem to have marginalized gender issues. It has always been an uphill battle for feminism. A lack of tangible advances and overall momentum often leads to attack by observers, who are not fully aware of the considerations and constraints involved. All the more need now to highlight some of the significant achievements made by people committed to bringing a better future for women (and men) in Hong Kong.

The history of the women's movement in Hong Kong can be roughly divided into three stages. The first stage ran from the immediate post-war years up to the mid-1970s. It was a time when women's concerns were voiced by prominent, committed individuals rather than from a solid organizational base. The Hong Kong Council of Women (HKCW) was formed in 1947. Its platform contained a wide range of concerns, but the general aim was to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women, in law, economic activities, and social status. Issues like separate taxation and equal pay for women were voiced as early as the 1950s. However, the issues that caught the eye and generated most effort were the glaring ones — the perpetuation of concubinage, and the gross disparity between women's and men's pay even in the same