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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF EQUAL  
OPPORTUNITY AND GENDER EQAULITY IN  
THE WORKPLACE**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Master of Philosophy**

**M. PHIL.**

**THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY**

**2005**



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Suen Sui Wan, Teresa  
February 2005

**Abstract of thesis titled "The construction of equal opportunity and gender equality in the workplace" submitted by Suen Sui-wan, Teresa for the degree of Master of Philosophy at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in February 2005.**

This study is an attempt to understand the construction of equal opportunity and gender equality in the workplace. Throughout the study, I have tried to link up the discussion on gender difference with the discussion on gender equality. In general, I have identified three discourses surrounding the discussion on gender difference based on the perspective of poststructural feminism. They are "women and men are the same," "women and men are different," as well as "women and men are at the same time different and the same." These three important discourses form the structure of this study. I hope to find out how the various meanings of equal opportunity and gender equality are constructed, negotiated and sometimes manipulated under the notions of these three discourses.

This research is based on in-depth interviews with twelve women coming from different backgrounds. First, I show how they understand gender difference. Three different positions, which echoed the above mentioned three discourses surrounding gender difference, can be found. Second, I demonstrate how they understand gender equality and equal opportunity and what their attitudes are. Once again, different understandings are developed. Among these understandings, "equality = same treatment = equal opportunity" is the most common one. Some point out that gender equality should be something more than equal opportunity between the two sexes. Besides, both positive and negative attitudes are found. Finally, I also illustrate how the various meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are constructed from their understandings of gender difference through the sharing of their working experiences.

The empirical findings have several implications. There is obviously confusion and ambivalence about the concepts of gender equality, equal opportunity, sameness and difference. To a certain extent, these confusions help maintain the status quo and disempower women. The findings also imply that women are active agents in the construction of gender equality and suggest the discussion on gender equality should go beyond the structural level. Finally, I conclude that the definition of gender equality should be broadened so that people's particular circumstances are acknowledged.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Human beings consist of a mix of numerous characteristics and attributes, but only a few of these are life-long markers of our social identity. Sex and gender are some of these markers and are major social categories in our society. The categories of sex and gender can operate to construct life chances differently for women and men. To a large extent, the experience of being a woman and a man is always very different even today.

I believe that everyone knows or at least hears about “gender equality” and “equal opportunity.” I also believe that everyone has an opinion, perception and attitude towards gender equality and equal opportunity, despite the fact that, they may not often think of and talk about these matters. In the Western countries, discussing and fighting for gender equality has a long history. There were organized movements whose goal was to achieve gender equality as early as in the nineteenth century. There were also a number of perspectives and theories developed to analyze the issue of gender equality. Nowadays, the various issues about gender still attract much public attention. Therefore, as pointed out by Harriet Bradley in 1999, many Western countries are experiencing a so-called “genderquake” in which there has not only been an increasing attention towards gender equality, but also a significant improvement in women’s status. This is especially true in the employment arena where the changing roles of women and men challenge the traditional notion of the male breadwinner. This “genderquake” has already raised much public attention and many people begin to have concerns whether



the status of women has risen too high and even higher than that of their male counterparts. As a result, the so-called “backlash” has started to occur.

In Hong Kong, there have been increasing public debates and discussions about the issue of gender equality especially after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance and the setting up of the Equal Opportunities Commission. Many people think that the situation and status of women is seemingly not bad, especially when compared with their counterparts in some other South-East Asian countries. Some may also note that women’s conditions have vastly improved in the past several decades. There have been numerous figures and statistics showing that there have been significant improvements in terms of financial and economic condition, educational attainment of women, and so on.

In the employment arena, many women are doing very well. Women are entering traditionally male-dominated occupations and professions. It is not difficult to list out a number of high-flying women and successful career women. As a result, the belief that women are already equal with men has become more and more popular in Hong Kong. This notion has become even more persuasive especially after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance in 1995, in which women are protected by law. However, this impression is only an illusion.

There has been a large amount of work telling us that various forms of discrimination and gender inequality still exist in contemporary Hong Kong. For example, in the employment arena, gender segregation of work is still a common phenomenon in Hong Kong. Women are continuously recruited into female-dominated

jobs and are still occupying lower status positions. The work performed by women are often devalued and women's ability, commitment, style and skills are often judged less valuable. Moreover, many women have been forced to accept low pay and poor working conditions and thus have often become preferred workers in difficult economic situations. In fact, it is what has happened in contemporary Hong Kong. The reported cases of sexual harassment have been continuously increasing in the workplace in recent years and it is believed that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Another typical example of discrimination against women or girls is the Secondary School Places Allocation system. The system has been used since 1978 to allocate secondary school places for primary six students until it was considered to discriminate against girl students by the Equal Opportunities Commission. It is a shame that although such an important educational policy was deemed discriminatory, it could be used for more than twenty years and was discontinued only in recent years. The above are just some of the numerous examples of gender inequality in Hong Kong. Various kinds of discrimination and unequal treatment of women can also be found in other aspects. Based on these, I would say that the popular assumption about the achievement of gender equality in Hong Kong is highly exaggerated. I also want to stress that inequality between women and men still exists in every aspect of our lives, but the patterns of inequality have changed in complex ways. Indeed, issues of gender inequality become more subtle. Therefore, it is meaningful and necessary to further study the problem of gender inequality in Hong Kong.

To address the issue of gender inequality is never simple or easy. Gender equality as a concept is complex, contentious and controversial. It is not a simple concept with a shared understanding and is always linked to other important concepts and values, such

as equal opportunity, justice, fairness, anti-discrimination and so on. In fact, it means different things to different people and the meanings of gender equality can shift and be used ambiguously according to context. Such ambiguity can function as a device in a struggle for power. In most cases, it places the less powerful group in a disadvantageous position and further disempower them in order to maintain the status quo. The vagueness and confusion around the concept of gender equality point to the need for further examination and discussion to understand what the concept really means to different people.

I believe that to capture and understand how people think about gender equality is not easy, because the concept is abstract in itself. Thus, we need some concrete directions in order to be more focused and not lose our way. From analyzing various perspectives on gender inequality, we can find that there is a core assumption towards the nature of women and men within these perspectives. In other words, these perspectives are developed out of their basic understanding of women and men, mainly whether they are the same or whether they are different. This understanding is therefore crucial in the discussion of gender equality. Thus, I would try to link these two levels of discussion in my study, the discussion on gender equality as well as the discussion on sameness and difference. It is by using all these considerations that I have developed this study.

This study is about gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. To study gender equality in employment is not new. Therefore, my study is by no means another attempt to focus, report and analyze various figures and statistics on different aspects of employment, like the rate of employment, wage differentials between women

and men and so on. Rather, it is a study to capture the understanding, perception and attitude towards gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace and to point out how these meanings are constructed and negotiated. Throughout this study, I would also try to link the discussion on gender equality and equal opportunity with the discussion on sameness and difference of women and men.

I choose to concentrate my work in the employment arena and to study gender inequality in the workplace. Indeed, gender inequality can happen in different areas: employment, family, school, church, shopping centre and so on. Employment is one of these areas and is commonly used as the indicator of women's position in society and it is also a major arena in the discussion of gender equality. Most feminists from different positions also believe that the position of women in the labour market is an important source of female disadvantage and gender inequality (Hakim, 1995, 1998; Dex, 1985; Walby, 1986, 1988, 1997; Adkins, 1995; Crompton, 1993, 1998, 1999). Although employment is important in the discussion of gender equality, it does not mean that the employment arena is more important than other areas, such as family. I recognize that the former cannot be separated from the latter and other aspects of the social formation. In recent years, there has also been an increasing awareness about the problem of separating employment and family in the discussion of gender inequality. Some feminist scholars, poststructuralist and postmodernist feminists in particular, even question the fixed binary opposition of family and work. However, as a beginner in feminist study and research, I think it would be too difficult to carry out a research which could take into account all these important aspects of our lives. Therefore, I choose to concentrate my work on the employment arena.

My study therefore has three main aims. First, it demonstrates the understandings and perceptions of and attitudes towards women's sameness as and difference from men as well as the understanding towards the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity. Second, it examines how the meanings of these concepts are being constructed through the operation of gender relations within the daily practices of working life. Finally, it illustrates how women are placed in a disadvantaged position within the different meanings of and discourses about these concepts which are being constructed in the workplace. I hope that my study can fill in some of the missing pieces in existing studies of gender inequality in the workplace by looking at the working experiences of women, and the meanings they have attached to their working experiences as well as how they constitute themselves through those meanings.

Having briefly introduced the background and aims of this study in this chapter, I will try to examine the issue of women and work in Hong Kong in chapter two. I will demonstrate briefly the history and development of the participation of women in the labour market in Hong Kong. The legal reform and the development of government policy concerning women and work will also be presented. I will then reveal the various studies on women and work and highlight the need for further study in this area. In chapter three, I will highlight the various theories dealing with gender inequality in the workplace. In general, three perspectives, including the individualist, the structuralist as well as the poststructuralist perspective will be discussed. Under each of these perspectives, different theories are developed and they will be examined in detail. I will then develop a critique of these existing theories of gender inequality in the workplace and will sketch out my approach and theoretical framework used to study this issue and which can give a more adequate account of the complex relations between

women and men in the workplace. In general, I will demonstrate that there are three important discourses surrounding the notion of gender equality and these three discourses also build the main structure of this study and I will further elaborate them in this chapter. Chapter four is about the methodological design of this study. I will discuss the methodological consideration of this study and the choice of research methods. The research process and its limitations will also be discussed. In chapter five to seven, I will give a detailed presentation of the findings of this study and will offer an analysis of the research data. The division of these three chapters on the findings and data analysis is based on the three discourses surrounding the notion of gender equality and they are “women are the same as men”, “women and men are different” and “women are at the same time different from and the same as men”. Respondents are put into these three categories according to their understandings towards the difference between women and men. In chapter five, I will present and analyze the findings of the first group of my respondents. All respondents from this group believe that women and men are different. In chapter six, I will present and analyze the findings of the second group of my respondents and all of them point out that women and men are the same. In chapter seven, the last chapter on findings and data, I will then present and analyze the findings of the last group of my respondents. Unlike the first two groups of respondents, this group of respondents comes to believe that women are both the same as and are different from men. In each of these three chapters, I will present the respondents’ perceptions and attitudes towards the meanings of sameness, difference, equality and equal opportunity. I will also illustrate how these concepts are being constructed in the workplace in order to place women in a disadvantaged position. Chapter eight is the concluding chapter of this study. I will,

first of all, make a summary on the previous chapters. I will then point out the valuable and significant implications of this study. Finally, I will also make some suggestions and recommendations for future practice in handling the issue of women's employment in Hong Kong.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Women and Work in Hong Kong**

This chapter is about gender inequality in the workplace in Hong Kong. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part is about the history and development of the participation of women in the labour market in Hong Kong. I discuss the different dimensions of the participation of women in the labour market in Hong Kong. Various figures and statistics on labour force participation rates, gender segregation, wage differentials between women and men, and so on, will be presented. It is hoped that through presenting and analyzing these figures and statistics, we can have a thorough grasp of the issue of the participation of women in the labour market in Hong Kong. I will conclude that gender inequality continues to exist in every aspect of women's work lives in the past and in contemporary Hong Kong as it has in the past.

The second part of this session is about the legal reform and government policy in Hong Kong. I try to highlight legal reform and government policies that are related to women and gender inequality. Special attention will be paid to those reforms and policies that deal with the situation of women in the employment arena.

In the last part of this chapter, I will reveal the various research studies on women and employment and highlight the need for further study in this area.



## **2.1 The Participation of Women in the Labour Market in Hong Kong**

Under the influence of the Chinese culture and tradition, the inherent subordination of women has been sustained in Hong Kong. The participation of women in economic activities was also limited in the early days of Hong Kong. Some of the women in those days worked as unpaid labour in petty family businesses. Others took part in paid domestic service, which was a common occupation for Chinese women in the early days of Hong Kong (Westwood, Ngo & Leung, 1997). But, on the whole, women's work was still considered unimportant.

In the postwar period, the participation of women in economic activities became more and more important. At that time, Hong Kong experienced rapid industrialization that brought an expansion of job opportunities especially in the manufacturing industries. Since then, women had begun to play a more active role in the labour market in Hong Kong. Women have entered different occupations and have occupied various positions.

It is undeniable that a large proportion of women are working and many of them can occupy highly paid, high status and high rank posts in contemporary Hong Kong. Women now can enter some of the traditionally male-dominated fields and jobs, such as those of firemen, engineers, administrators and doctors. Thus, there has been a popular perception that gender equality in the workplace is guaranteed and achieved, especially after the setting up of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance and the Equal Opportunities Commission, where discrimination on the basis of sex is made unlawful. However, when we look closer at some of the figures and statistics on the participation of women in the labour market, it is not difficult to find that gender inequality still exists in every

aspect of women's working lives in Hong Kong. Therefore, in order to obtain a macro picture of women's employment in Hong Kong, it is necessary to look at some important figures and statistics related to this issue.

However, it is not an easy task to unravel the participation of women in the labour market in Hong Kong within several paragraphs. It would include a lot of dimensions, figures, and statistics which cannot be demonstrated in detail in this section because it would require much more space. Since the purpose of the review of the participation of women in the labour market here is to provide only a background on this issue, I will only highlight those dimensions which are believed to be more important.

### ***2.1.1 The labour force participation rate of women***

It is true to say that there have been considerable increases in both the proportion and number of women who were employed over the past several decades. As shown in table 2.1, the female labour force participation rate has undergone a drastic increase from 36.8% in 1961 to 49.5% in 1981 and then stood at 47.9% in 1991 and 50.7% in 2001. On the contrary, the male labour force participation rate has been decreasing continuously from 90.4% in 1961 to as low as 72.9% in 2001. On the surface, it is apparent that the disparity between the labour force participation rate of women and men has been narrowed. For instance, in 1961, the difference was 53.6% and in 1981, the difference was only 33%. The difference further decreased to 31% in 1991 and 22.2% in 2001. It seems that the difference between the two sexes in the participation in the labour market has been narrowed, and very often this leads to the assumption and conclusion that women are not disadvantaged anymore in the labour market in Hong Kong. However, this is definitely not the case. There is obviously a need to re-

delineate and to re-state these figures and statistics so that a rigorous understanding of the participation of women in the labour market can be generated.

Table 2.1: Labour Force Participation Rate by Sex (in percentage), 1961- 2001.

Year	Male	Female	Difference
1961	90.4	36.8	53.6
1971	84.7	42.8	41.9
1981	82.5	49.5	33
1986	80.5	48.9	31.6
1991	78.9	47.9	31
1996	75.7	47.8	27.9
1997	75.1	47.9	27.2
1998	74.6	48.5	26.1
1999	74.0	49.2	24.8
2000	73.5	49.9	23.6
2001	72.9	50.7	22.2

Sources: Hong Kong 1976 By-Census: Main Report; Hong Kong 1981 Census: Main Report; Hong Kong 1991 Population Census: Main Report; Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistics: 2002 Edition, Gender and Society in Hong Kong: A Statistical Profile.

The rapid increase in the female labour force participation rate in the 1970s and in the early 1980s can be explained by the effect of industrialization in Hong Kong. However, after a promising upturn in the early period, women's participation hit a plateau starting from the mid 1980s. The female labour force participation rate reached its peak in 1981 and began to drop until 1998. From 1998 onward, the female labour force participation rate began to increase and in 2001, the rate was 50.7% which was the highest in the history of Hong Kong. On the other hand, the male labour force participation rate was the highest in 1961 and reached 90.4%, but since then, the rate continued to drop and the rate was as low as 72.9% in 2001. It is generally believed that the recent increase in female labour force participation rate is closely related to the economic downturn after 1997. Because of the downturn in the economy and many

men losing their jobs, women, especially those who were economically inactive, like homemakers, had to re-enter the labour market in order to support their family. Actually, the phenomenon that women have been forced to accept low pay and poor working conditions and thus have often become preferred workers in difficult economic situations is very common in many other countries.

Besides, even though the female labour force participation rate has been increasing in general, there are great variations among women of different backgrounds, such as marital status, age, education and so on (Chan & Ng, 1994; Wong, 1995; Westwood, Ngo & Leung, 1997). One typical example is when the age variable is included, we can see that there have been different patterns for men and for women in their labour force participation across the life span. The female pattern usually shows a “M form” where there is not only a peak in the early twenties, but also a second peak as the women enter their middle age. It suggests that women have to leave the labour market after marriage or the birth of their first child in their twenties and re-enter the labour market when their children grown up. For the great majority of adult men, on the contrary, long-term full-time employment is not questioned. This interrupted working pattern is usually considered as undesirable to most of the employers.

Based on the above analysis, it is apparent that women have been more active in the labour market, but we should be cautious that there are great variations among women of different backgrounds. Factors such as age, marital status and education can have important effects on the participation of women in the labour market. These findings and observations take us one step closer to the reality of the constraints and various features of the participation of women in the labour market.

### ***2.1.2 Unemployment and underemployment rate of women***

Apart from the above, it is apparent that in the past several decades, both the unemployment rate and underemployment rate of women are lower than that of men. From table 2.2, we can see that the unemployment rate of females increased from 2.5% in 1986 to 3.9% in 2001. Although there is a 1.4% increase, the increase is much lower than that of their male counterparts. From the same table, we can find out that the unemployment rate of males increased from 3.0% in 1986 to 6.0% in 2001 and in 1999, the figure was as high as 7.2%. Not only the unemployment rate, but also the underemployment rate of females is lower than that of males. As shown in table 2.3, the underemployment rate of females does not have much fluctuation over the decades and there is only around 1% variation. The underemployment rate of males is not only higher than that of their female counterparts, but it also has greater fluctuations over the years.

Table 2.2: Unemployment Rate by Sex (in percentage), 1986 – 2001.

Sex	1986	1991	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Male	3.0	1.9	3.1	2.3	5.2	7.2	5.6	6.0
Female	2.5	1.6	2.3	2.0	4.0	4.9	4.1	3.9

Source: Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistics: 2002 Edition.

Table 2.3: Underemployment Rate by Sex (in percentage), 1986 – 2001.

Sex	1986	1991	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Male	1.9	1.9	2.2	1.5	3.2	3.6	3.4	3.1
Female	1.4	1.1	0.8	0.7	1.4	1.9	1.8	1.7

Source: Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistics: 2002 Edition.

It is undeniable that the unemployment and underemployment rates of females are lower than those of males over the years. However, we should be cautious about the problem of “hidden employment”, which has not been revealed in the official statistics (Chan, Leung & Hong Kong Young Women’s Christian Association, 1999). Moreover, women seem more willing to be employed in unstable and casual work when compared with men, because women’s wages are always thought to be secondary or in addition to the male-bread winner so that they are more willing to accept lower wages. All these factors explain why the unemployment and underemployment rate of women are lower than that of men throughout the years.

Based on the above discussion, I want to stress that we should be very cautious in analyzing the statistics and census data related to women and employment. If we just look at the participation, underemployment and unemployment rates, we can easily come up with a conclusion that gender equality is highly achieved. To a large extent, it is misleading. Besides, the labour force participation rate, the unemployment and underemployment rate are only some of the numerous indicators of women’s employment situation, even though these indicators are very important. Other indicators which are related to the quality of participation, such as average income, promotion prospect, and so on are also very important and significant in reflecting the position of women in the labour market. In fact, the wage differentials as well as the segregation of women and men into different occupations, jobs and ranks have been demonstrated to be important and significant factors in the determination of gender equality in the workplace.

### ***2.1.3 Wage differential***

Even though the gap between the labour force participation rates of females and males has narrowed and females consistently have lower unemployment and underemployment rates than males over the past 16 years, their income is much lower than that of males. In fact, there has been a significant wage gap between the two sexes throughout the years. For example, the median monthly employment earnings of employed females was \$8,500 in 2001 while those for males was \$12,000. In other words, in average, a female earns only about 70% of her male counterpart. The median monthly employment earnings of females was also lower than the average median monthly employment earnings of employed persons, which was 10,000 in 2001. It is important to note that the wage differential of the two sexes has widened in recent years. As shown in table 2.4, we can see that, in 1986, the median monthly employment earnings of employed males and females were \$3,000 and \$2,000 in Hong Kong dollars respectively. Employed females could only earn about 66% of that of males in 1986. The situation has much improved within ten years and in 1996, employed females could earn as much as 80% of the earnings of their male counterparts. However, since the economy worsened in 1997, the disparity of employment earnings between the two sexes has widened continuously. In 1997, females earned about 77.2% of earnings of males and in 1998, this figure dropped to 75%. The figure continued to drop and in 1999, females could earn only about 70.8% of the income of males. In 2000, there was a slight improvement and the figure increased to 73.3%. Unluckily, in 2001, the figure dropped again to only 70.8%. Thus, over the 15 years, there has not been much improvement in the difference between the earnings of employed males and females. In fact, there is only a 4% increase within these 15 years.

Table 2.4: Median Monthly Employment Earnings of Employed Persons by Sex, 1986 -2001.

Year	1986	1991	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Male	\$3,000	\$6,000	\$10,000	\$11,000	\$12,000	\$12,000	\$12,000	\$12,000
Female	\$2,000	\$4,500	\$8,000	\$8,500	\$9,000	\$8,500	\$8,800	\$8,500
Difference	\$1,000	\$1,500	\$2,000	\$2,500	\$3,000	\$3,500	\$3,200	\$3,500
% females earn compared with males	66%	75%	80%	77.2%	75%	70.8%	73.3%	70.8%

Source: Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistics: 2002 Edition.

#### ***2.1.4 Gender segregation of work***

Apart from wage differentials between the two sexes, the problem of the gender segregation of work still exists in contemporary Hong Kong society. Both vertical and horizontal gender segregation of work is reflected in the available figures and statistics. Vertical gender segregation exists when men are most commonly working in higher grade occupations while women are most commonly working in lower grade occupations. On the other hand, horizontal gender segregation exists where the recruitment of women and men occurs into sex-typed feminine and masculine occupations (Walby, 1988; Crompton & Sanderson, 1990; Chan & Ng, 1994; Westwood & Ngo & Leung, 1997; Hakim, 1998).

Table 2.5 shows the percentages of employed males and females in specific occupational categories in 2001. This classification of the occupational distribution of women and men also provides some indication of vertical segregation in the labour force derived from the pay differentials. It is obvious that the occupational category of



managers and administrators and the category of professionals are the highest, while the category of elementary occupations is the lowest in terms of monthly income.

As we can see, in 2001, men were still dominating the high status jobs and those jobs which required specific skills. Men were over-presented in the occupational category of managers and administrators, where they constituted 74.5% of this category, and the ratio of women to men approximately still stood at close to 1:3. As suggested by Westwood, Ngo and Leung (1997), the occupational category of manager and administrators is important because it represents the location of much organizational power, including power to hire, to promote, to allocate tasks and so on, where the role of women in employment is constructed and reconstructed.

Similarly, employed males were over-presented and constituted 67.3% in the category of professionals. The occupations included in this category are medical doctors, lawyers, engineers and so on. These jobs are also generally regarded as high status and high paid occupations. Unfortunately, even though the educational qualification and attainment of women been improved, the ratio of women to men is still 1:2 in this category and female professionals are still receiving a lower wage relative to male professionals.

We can also observe that in the category of associate professionals, the percentages of males and females included in this occupational category were very similar and their median monthly incomes were also the same. However, we should be very cautious that under this category are those occupations such as nurses, primary and secondary teachers, social workers and so on. Most of these jobs are directly under the

supervision or subvention of the government and the paid structure is usually the same. It explains why the average monthly income can be the same for women and men. Besides, most of these jobs are stereotypically perceived as women's occupations and are lower paid and of lower status compared with typically male professions as discussed above.

In addition to this, men constituted 96.8% in the category of craft and related workers and 86.2% in the category of plant and machine operators and assemblers in 2001. Although these jobs are not usually regarded as high status jobs, they are still thought to be more skillful jobs which require special techniques and are better paid than jobs in the category of elementary occupations. Thus, even at the non-professional and lower level jobs, men still occupy more skillful positions.

The percentage of women in positions of clerks compared to other occupations is the highest, the percentage being as high as 72.7% and women receiving exactly the same salary as their male counterparts. On the surface, it seems that the two sexes are quite equal. However, we should note that clerical jobs are sometimes considered as a kind of "dead-end" jobs. There are not many promotional opportunities and the nature of work is often very routine and unattractive. Thus, in most cases, men with better qualifications will not choose to take up clerical jobs. In fact, it would be useful to further study the concentration of women in clerical work, but I have to leave this project to others.

In addition, the percentage of women in the categories of service workers and shop sales workers was also high when compared to other occupations. Women's role

in the service sector has always been significant especially after the 1980s and with the effects of economic restructuring in Hong Kong. Even though service work and sales work are often regarded as women's work, there has been a clear pay differential between the two sexes.

Finally, it is meaningful to note that women were over-presented in the occupational category of elementary occupations and they constituted 60.2% of this category. The earning gap between the two sexes is the greatest in this occupational group. Females earned almost 50% less than their male equivalents. It is true that a certain percentage of employed females in this category are foreign domestic helpers who have monthly employment earnings of less than \$4,000. But many local newspapers and research still report that a large number of women are being employed in those low status, part-time, low wage and low-skilled jobs. Examples of these jobs are cleaning amahs, cashiers, domestic helpers, casual workers and so on. Many of these women are in their middle age and have previously worked in the manufacturing sector. They lost their jobs because of the decline of the manufacturing industry in Hong Kong and could only be employed in those jobs with no benefit and security, poor working conditions, long working hours and so on. For example, in local research conducted by Ho, Leung and Drover in 1999, the majority of women (67%) reported wages less than \$5,000 per month; 62% reported that they had to work 40 to 60 hours per week and 4% even reported that they worked in excess of 60 hours per week. We should note that today's situation could be worse than at the time of the research because of the further economic downturn.

Table 2.5: Employed Persons and Median Monthly Employment Earnings of Employed Persons by Occupation and Sex, 2001.

Occupation	Sex	Percentage	Median Monthly Employment Earnings
Managers and administrators	M	74.5%	\$30,000
	F	25.5%	\$28,000
Professionals	M	67.3%	\$32,000
	F	32.7%	\$30,000
Associate professionals	M	59.6%	\$16,000
	F	40.4%	\$16,000
Clerks	M	27.3%	\$10,000
	F	72.7%	\$10,000
Service workers and shop sales workers	M	53.6%	\$10,000
	F	46.4%	\$7,000
Craft and related workers	M	96.8%	\$10,000
	F	3.2%	\$8,000
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	M	86.2%	\$10,000
	F	13.8%	\$6,000
Elementary occupations	M	39.8%	\$7,500
	F	60.2%	\$3,900

Source: Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistics: 2002 Edition.

From the above discussion, gender segregation indeed exists in contemporary Hong Kong society. The disproportionate concentration of females in lowest paid and lowest status occupations is supported by government statistics and census data. There is a clear earnings differential between women and men in almost every sector of employment although there are considerable variations between occupations. In most cases, even within the same category, females still receive a lower level of wage payment relative to their male counterparts. Thus, the success of a small proportion of women entering into male-dominated occupations and occupying high-status positions does not mean that gender segregation and gender inequality in the workplace has disappeared.

As a conclusion, from the above analysis, we discover a more revealing picture of women's disadvantages in employment in Hong Kong over the years. It is obvious that, even though there has been a significant increase in both the number and proportion of women whom are working, a lot of them are systematically allocated relatively low positions in the labour market. Gender inequality still exists in various aspects of women's working lives.

Facing this problem of gender inequality in the workplace, what has the government done to improve the situation? In the coming section, we will explore how the government has dealt with the issue of gender inequality in the workplace.

## **2.2 The Legal Reform and Government Policy in Hong Kong**

Hong Kong has long exhibited a unique mixture of traditional Chinese values and values of the Western culture. Although Hong Kong has been under the influence of Western culture, it remains very much a Chinese community with a persistence of Chinese traditions and value systems. Traditional China is usually viewed as a strongly patriarchal society. Men, in general, could control their wealth, property, status and security while the role of women, on the other hand, was defined by their relation to men (Wong, 1974; Jackson, 1980; Lebra, 1980; Pearson & Leung, 1995).

Just like other colonial governments, the Hong Kong government was generally very reluctant to impose legislation to intervene in Chinese customs. It is also true to say that women's issues and concerns seldom became part of the legitimate agenda. The following review of the legal reform and government policy in Hong Kong demonstrates clearly that women and men have been treated differently and in most

cases, unequally before the law. I want to stress that the unequal treatment of women can be explained by the fact that women are thought to be different from men in China.

A typical example is the Mui tsai system. Even though the Ordinance on slavery was passed in 1844, the mui tsai system still existed until 1938, when a third Amendment to the Female Domestic Service Ordinance was introduced and passed. Another example that reflects the unequal treatment of women is the marriage system in China. Chinese customary marriage was polygamous in nature. Concubinage flourished in China since a long time ago. The institution of concubinage also remained intact for a long period of time under the colonial government. The problem of concubinage was raised in 1940s, but the attitude of the government was still passive. Only after more than two decades of discussion and consultation did the colonial government introduce the Marriage Reform Bill in 1970 and it was passed in the same year. The new Marriage Law finally came into force in 1971. In addition, the issue of female inheritance rights in the New Territories could only be settled as late as 1994 with the passage of the New Territories Land (Exemption) Ordinance (Jones, 1995) as the government did not want to make any attempt to scrap the traditional inheritance customs in the New Territories.

These three examples show very clearly how women and men are treated differently and unequally before the law. The unequal treatment of women can be explained by the fact that women were thought to be different from men in China. Under the influence of Confucian ideology, it was generally believed that women and men were born differently. Accordingly, women were by nature ignorant, narrow-minded, sly and jealous (Freedman, 1966). It is very difficult to trace how these concepts

were developed, but it had significant influence on how women were treated and eventually, the subordinate role of women was secured. To a large extent, these traditional values are still influential in contemporary Hong Kong. They have shown some persistence into the modern era and have framed, defined and structured women's role in a profound way.

In the arena of work and employment, the rights of women are also largely neglected and ignored. The arena of work and employment has long been considered as the domain of men. Women, on the contrary, were relegated to the home and their greatest responsibility and contribution were to produce male descendants and to take care of the family members. There is also an ancient saying that "a woman without ability is virtuous." In some cases, women were not suggested to take part in public affairs or were even not allowed to go outside of the house in ancient China.

Thus, although a greater proportion of women were working after industrialization in the post-war period, women were still treated unequally in the workplace because the employment of women has long been considered as unimportant. In fact, we can see that women and men were unequal in other arenas of our lives from the above examples.

In the previous section, we have already discussed sex discrimination and gender inequality in the workplace with reference to various statistics and census. In this section, I want to highlight the legal reforms and government policies which are related to the issue of women and work. Through legislation, statutes and policies that frame employment relations, welfare provision and related matters, the situation of women in

the work force has been changing both directly and indirectly. I also want to stress that some of these legal reforms required a very long period of discussion and consultation before they could finally come into force. Sometimes, legal reforms were not comprehensive in the protection of the rights of women in employment and there were backlashes from different parties which resulted in making the situation more complicated.

In 1929, the Industrial Employment of Children Ordinance was extended to women in order to protect them from dangerous industries and to limit their working hours. This legislation started the differential treatment of women by aligning the interests of women with those of children. It assumed that women were in need of the same level of protection as children and young people. The protective provisions were extended and further restrictions were introduced in 1932, 1955 as well as 1967. In 1988, the government gazetted the Women and Young Persons (Industry) (Amendment) Regulations which allowed greater flexibility in the employment of women. However, it has been commented that the amendment was made to meet the needs of Hong Kong industrialists rather than the needs of women (Ng, 1983; Pearson, 1990; Westwood, Ngo & Leung, 1997).

This so-called “protective” legislation has lead to both criticism and appreciation. Generally speaking, the legislation had important effects on protecting women from exploitative onerous employment relations and conditions, which was thought to be necessary especially in the early stage of industrialization. But, on the other hand, the legislation was criticized as denying women certain employment opportunities. It would be valuable to further examine these different points of view, but because of the



limited scope of this dissertation, it is impossible to include this analysis here. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Ng, 1983 and Westwood, Ngo & Leung, 1997.

My intention here is to point out that these controversial and contradictory interpretations of the legislation are due to different perceptions of women, their roles, their abilities, and so on. It includes the ways how the differences between women and men are understood, interpreted and constructed. In general, those who assert that women are different and require special treatment and protection are on the “difference” side. On the other hand, those who argue that women are the same as men and should be treated equally are on the “equality” or “sameness” side. Of course, this division may simplify the situation. But, I want to point out that in most cases, people tend to make arguments in this manner especially in the process of developing legislation and policy. In fact, the debate about equality and difference has always been used to analyze women’s issues. This dualist thinking about equality and difference structures an impossible choice. As pointed out by Joan W. Scott (1988), one can only choose between “equality” and “difference”. In other words, if you opt for equality, special treatment and protection of women seems to be antithetical. To the contrary, if you opt for difference, you have to admit that equality is unattainable. The above discussed protective legislation is a typical example. This dilemma can also be found in other women’s issues that will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Another important issue about women and employment is equal pay for women. The issue of equal pay for women was made public as early as the 1950s. But the government was passive on this issue, with the excuse that it would have profound

effects on the *laissez faire* policy in Hong Kong. In 1963, the Joint Committee on Equal Pay for Equal Work comprising various women's and social organizations was formed to pressure the government. And, in 1965, the government agreed to implement equal pay in the civil service within ten years time. Although the government had adopted an equal pay policy for the civil servants by the 1980s, there was no equal pay legislation to regulate the private sector until the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance in 1995. Once again, it reflects very much the fact that female workers and male workers have long been considered different and it explains why they are said to be entitled to different wages.

Another crucial legal reform related to women and work is to do with maternity leave. Maternity entitlements have long been a sensitive issue in Hong Kong. The first legislative move to introduce maternity entitlements to pregnant employees began in the early 1970s. Later, in 1979, the Hong Kong Council of Women (HKCW) campaigned vigorously on paid maternity leave as a recognition of women's right and contribution. Under the external pressures as well as the pressure from local women's groups, the Employment (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill was passed in 1981, entitling women workers to ten weeks of maternity leave with two-thirds of their pay. It is obvious that the above examples demonstrate clearly that the government has been slow to address the women's issue in the workforce. In most cases, sex discrimination and gender inequality in the workplace have been tolerated and unregulated.

Another crucial step in legal reform in relation to women's issues is to do with the Sex Discrimination Ordinance. The struggle to legislate against sex discrimination in Hong Kong began in 1989. However, the government has been very passive on this

issue. After the passage of the Bill of Rights Ordinance in 1991, many women's groups and non-government organizations started to press the government to extend the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to Hong Kong to prohibit all forms of discrimination against women. Under great external pressure, the government set up a working group to ascertain the extent to which sex discrimination was a problem in 1992. Surprisingly, the report concluded that sex discrimination was not serious in Hong Kong. Then, in 1993, the Equal Opportunities Bill was proposed by a female legislator, Ms. Anna Wu. Because of the intimate relationship between the government and powerful capitalist interests, the government did not support the wide-ranging Equal Opportunities Bill proposed by Ms. Anna Wu. Finally, only the Sex Discrimination Ordinance could be passed on 28 June 1995 and the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance was passed on 24 June 1997.

To most of the women's groups and non-government organizations, the Sex Discrimination Ordinance and the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance are better than nothing. The pieces of legislation can certainly provide basic protection to women. But, they are criticized for their basic assumption of symmetry approach, which suggests that both women and men suffer equally from discrimination. In addition to this, although some women are in a better position to benefit from the legislation than others, it is true that the most vulnerable are still being the least likely to have access to these changes. In a similar vein, the Equal Opportunities Commission is not without its critics. Generally speaking, its limited power of prosecution and its strategy of conciliation are criticized to be too conservative. The repeal of Anna Wu because she is thought to be too radical and the recent affair of Michael Wong, the former Chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, also illustrates very clearly the attitude of our

government. It is true to say that the issue of equal opportunities and gender equality is low on the government's list of priorities. Moreover, the problem of direct appointment of the Chairman by the Chief Executive is also questionable. Under this circumstance, the Equal Opportunities Commission could only achieve what the government wants it to achieve. Apart from these criticisms, there have been the "backlashes" after the passage of the two ordinances and the setting up of the Equal Opportunities Commission.

A typical example of backlash is the abolition of the Women and Young Persons (Industry) Regulations. It was repealed rather than extended to all workers with the excuse that women should be treated exactly the same as men under the new legislation. What I want to stress is the excuse or the discourse related to the abolition of this regulation rather than whether the regulation should be repealed or not even though this discussion is also important. Before the passage of the two ordinances, women and men were considered as different so that women should be treated differently. But, after the passage of the ordinances, the difference between women and men "suddenly" disappeared. It gives us an important insight that women and men are either "the same" or "different" and that there is no in between position, especially in terms of the legislation and at policy level. It shows very clearly that the manipulation of definitions and concepts is never difficult.

Another backlash is the proposal to grant paternity leave to married male employees. This proposal is considered to be women-friendly because it suggests that child-rearing is never the sole responsibility of women. However, this proposal was said to be discriminatory because it is based on marital status and would go against the

equality ordinance. These two examples demonstrate once again the impossible choice when equality and difference are paired dichotomously. They also illustrate how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunities can be constructed, negotiated and manipulated to disempower women instead of empowering them.

From the above discussion, it is obvious that, although women have entered the world of work, very little has been done to structure this world according to women's needs and concerns. It has also been apparent that different forms of sex discrimination and gender inequality in the employment arena have long been tolerated and unregulated in Hong Kong. From the legal reforms and the development of government policies, we can see that the process in instituting them is never easy. Very often, it requires a long period of discussion and consultation. Besides, I have also emphasized that the use of the notion of sexual difference and sameness is common in dealing with women's issues and how this notion places an impossible bind on the legislation and policy level. But, no matter what the bind is, there is a possibility to place women in a more disadvantaged position.

### **2.3 Research and Study on Women and Work**

In Hong Kong, since the mid 1980s, studies about women have grown both in quality and quantity. There have also been increasing numbers of studies and research concerning women and employment and in this section, I will review some of them.

Most of the research and studies on women and employment conducted in the 1980s and the early 1990s focused on the growth in female labour force participation. After industrialization, there had been a growing recognition of the need to study the

causes and effects of women's career development. Consequently, a substantial body of literature and studies dealt with the multiple factors contributing to the participation of women in the work force and / or the influences of the growth in female labour force participation on the role of women as well as on their families (Ng, 1983; Ho, 1984; Chan, 1986; Cho, 1987). The typical research strategy was to correlate aggregate survey data or government statistics and then explain the observed correlations. Based on this, research and studies using government data and statistics tended to predominate. These works are absolutely necessary and valuable and should be continued in order to delineate trends. But, this so-called "conventional approach" hides women's subjective experiences, attitudes, perceptions, feelings as well as emotions in producing and reproducing the existing gender relations in employment. In fact, experiences, feelings and so on cannot be easily documented through statistics and figures. Another approach is needed in order to grasp subjective experiences and feelings of women.

Basically, research and studies conducted in the 1990s and the 2000s followed similar formula as those in the 1980s (Chan & Ng, 1994; Leung, 1995; Wong, 1995; Westwood, Ngo & Leung, 1997; Chan, Leung & Y.W.C.A., 1999). Studies on women and work in Hong Kong still pay much attention to the changes in the pattern of female employment. Female labour force participation, gender segregation of work, wage differentials were emphasized. Most of these studies have tried to include more variables, such as education attainment, age, marital status, place of origin and so on in the analysis of the changes in the pattern of female employment. Thus, it is undeniable that these studies could provide a more in-depth understanding towards women and employment. Another crucial feature of most of these works was that they tended to combine the use of quantitative and qualitative methods. Very often, qualitative data,

such as data from interviews and case study, would be included in order to complement quantitative data. It demonstrates that quantitative research methods and data were considered inadequate. However, the use of qualitative data was only complementary in nature, in order to support the quantitative findings.

In addition, there also was a tendency to focus on a particular group of women in these studies, such as working class women, middle-aged women, married women, women managers and administrators. For example, there were a number of studies done in the mid 1990s to examine the effect and impact of economic restructuring on working class women in Hong Kong (Chiu, Lai & Lee, 1996; Chiu & Lee, 1997). Some studies focused their attention on married women. The study by Lui (1991) took married women as the main target group for study and showed that some married women were engaged in industrial outwork in order to balance their responsibilities at home. Similarly, Ngo (1992) studied the employment status of married women in Hong Kong. On the whole, there has been an increase in both the quantity and the diversity of women's studies from the 1990s. Despite this growing quantity and diversity, most of this work is quantitative in nature or focuses on analyzing various statistics and figures.

The work of Salaff (1981 & 1995) and the work of the Committee for Asian Women (CAW) (1995) are atypical. The approach of these studies was very different from the above discussed studies. Qualitative research methods, in-depth interviews or case studies were employed so that they represent a welcome departure from conventional research and studies. In the work of Salaff, through in-depth interviews, the subjective experiences and feelings of the female workers, or the so-called "working daughters" were revealed and illustrated. The work of CAW also took the qualitative

approach in understanding the changes, employment conditions and status of women. This research made use of case studies as the main research method to examine the impact of industrial restructuring on women workers while statistics and figures were used as complement. To a great extent, these works provide a profound insight in the study of women and employment in Hong Kong, by pointing out the importance of the subjective meanings that women have attached to their work and jobs. They also indicate that experiences and subjective meanings are so complex and complicated that they cannot be revealed by statistics and figures.

It is unquestionable that these works are significant and valuable in understanding women and work. Although these works aim at understanding the various dimensions of gender inequality in the workplace, none of them captures how the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity are being understood. I want to point out that this area of study is absolutely important. These concepts are themselves abstract and controversial. They mean different things to different people. However, this kind of study is limited even after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance and the setting up of the Equal Opportunities Commission. Although it is difficult to predict the influence of the ordinance in affecting the perception and attitude of people towards the issue of sex discrimination and gender inequality, it is meaningful and important to understand how people think about gender equality and equal opportunities. In fact, this kind of work is very inadequate in Hong Kong. Based on this consideration, I believe that research which links the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunities and women's employment situation is needed. It is also significant to understand how the meaning of gender equality and equal opportunities is constructed, produced and negotiated in the workplace.



This chapter has tried to illustrate the participation of women in the labour market in Hong Kong. Although there has been an increase in the participation of women in the labour market, it does not bring with it increased equality. Indeed, there is evidence showing that sex discrimination and gender inequality exist in every aspect of women's employment. The legal reforms and the development of government policies in relation to women's issues have also been discussed in detail. It is apparent that the debate of sameness and difference plays a very important role in constructing these legal reforms and government policies. In the last part of this chapter, I have also introduced and discussed various research and studies on women's issues especially in the employment arena. I have demonstrated that there is a need to have further studies in understanding the complexity of gender issues in the workplace. In the next chapter, we shall turn to examine the theoretical discussions on the issue of gender inequality in the workplace.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities in the Workplace**

In understanding gender equality and equal opportunities in the workplace, different perspectives have been developed. These different perspectives have different underlying assumptions and theorizations surrounding the issue of gender equality and equal opportunities in the workplace. Generally speaking, in this chapter I will introduce three perspectives: the individualist perspective, the structuralist perspective and the poststructuralist perspective. Under each of these perspectives, various approaches and theories are developed and I will discuss them in detail.

In this review of the literature, I will begin with elaborating and distinguishing these perspectives on gender equality in the workplace. I will try to demonstrate the theoretical assumptions and explanations of these perspectives. The strengths and weaknesses of these perspectives in understanding the issue of gender equality in the workplace will also be discussed. Here, I will highlight how the formation of these theoretical assumptions and explanations is related to their understanding of women's sameness to or difference from men, i.e., the sameness-versus-difference debate. I will then point out three important discourses on gender equality which are formulated within this debate. After examining how these perspectives have contributed to the understanding and the explanation of gender inequality in the workplace, I will discuss their implications for my project in the final part of this section.

### **3.1 Individualist Perspectives**

Individualist perspectives can include a number of political, sociological as well as theoretical positions. In general, these positions share similar assertions and put emphasis on the “individual” in understanding various social problems. Despite their similarity, these positions may have their unique concerns and focuses. I have chosen the following three approaches for discussion: biological essentialism, neo-classical economic theory and liberal feminism. The reason I have chosen these three approaches is that they make important contributions to and influence the discussion of gender inequality in the workplace. Besides, many of the concepts and discourses developed in these approaches are largely reused in the postmodern period, placing women in a disadvantaged position in the workplace.

#### ***3.1.1 Biological essentialists reinforce gender inequality in the workplace***

In this part, I will discuss how biological essentialists reinforce gender inequality in the workplace. The term “biological essentialists” includes a number of positions with very similar understandings and explanations towards the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. From positivists, functionalists to conflict theorists and others are included under this label. In classical sociology, “women” and “work” seem to be two separate things and “woman” as an object of study is largely ignored. At the heart of classical sociology is the division between work and family. Traditionally, work and family occupy separate sites. Work is considered as the domain of men while family is considered as the domain of women. Making things and making things happen, is masculine; caring for people and reproducing the next generation, is feminine. Thus, men are assumed to be workers while women are assumed to be mothers.

I would say that the assumptions of these classical sociological theories on men's and women's work closely mirror the general thoughts about male-female difference. Generally speaking, classical sociologists believed that women are different from men. Their differences are largely biologically and physically based. It is true that, throughout our history, biological accounts of male-female difference have prevailed. As early as the nineteenth century, some scientists, and even some philosophers, such as Edward Clarke, Charles Darwin, Patrick Geddes, and J. Arthur Thomson, tried to prove that women and men are born with a difference. Accordingly, women and men are different in many areas. These differences may be due to genetic composition, hormones and brain development. According to this logic, gender difference is inborn and natural. As a result, it is inevitable and unchangeable.

This male-female difference discourse has important influence on people's conception towards men's work and women's work. Women are thought to be "natural wives and mothers" and not to belong to the work domain. In fact, some major sociological contributors and famous sociologists are also affected by these discourses and implicitly or explicitly pointed out that women are not suitable for work or employment. One typical example is Emile Durkheim. Durkheim did include discussions of women in his studies but he asserted that women fulfilling their traditional roles were functional to the family (Ollenburger and Moore, 1998; Crompton, 1999). Thus, he implicitly agreed that women should be kept in the private sphere instead of working outside of their families. He also argued that physical and emotional differences between women and men rendered them unsuitable for full participation in employment. The fact that women are homemakers is taken for granted.

Thus, even in the field of sociology, the study of women, especially in the workplace, is missing.

Another example is Max Weber. As pointed out by Thomas (1985), Weber's theoretical work uncritically reflected his gendered assumptions about the sexual division of labour, even though he was a supporter of social and civil rights for women. In particular, both the worker and bureaucrat were described as free of social ties and domestic responsibilities, a male instead of female characteristic. In this case, women could only be viewed as homemakers and they were not included in the study of work.

Similarly, as stated by Ollenburger and Moore (1998), Herbert Spencer also proposed that women should be kept in the domestic sphere and denied the right to compete for occupations with men. Spencer's positivist organicism provided early models for the sociological analysis of women. According to Spencer, organicism implied an equilibrium or a balance. When all parts work to benefit the whole, society maintained an equilibrium. Since then, women are often analyzed in terms of their "place" in society, that is, their function (their roles as wife and mother) in the family. Women should be kept in the domestic sphere and should perform their maternal role. This arrangement is thought to be beneficial to the family and to society as a whole.

Talcott Parsons also developed a similar discussion about women in his role theory. In fact, his sociological writing about women from a functionalist perspective is perhaps the most influential one. Parsons described men as having an "active instrumental role" while women are having a "socioemotional role in the family." He believed that the distinct roles for women and men were inevitable, and in his words,

“functional” to an industrialized society. Thus, the functionalist perspective tries to explain differences between the two sexes from a balance perspective and assumes the division of roles to be functional to our society. In other words, the traditional role of women as homemakers is viewed as functional and good to the whole society.

From the above analysis, we can see that the discussion of women in classical sociology is very limited. The unwritten assumption that women are not suitable for employment and women’s economic role is unimportant is not uncommon in early sociological theories. This theoretical assumption is closely related to how the sociologists think about male-female difference. In other words, women are believed to be different from men. Since women are not treated as workers, we can imagine the discussion of gender inequality in the workplace seemingly impossible under this atmosphere. In fact, gender inequality is thought to not exist because women and men are viewed as different. In most cases, women are not treated as equal to men not only in the workplace but also in many other areas, just like education, civil rights, public rights and so on, because of their differences with men.

The above discussed sociological theories have met with severe criticisms. These theories are based only on the male experience, patriarchal structure and a masculine paradigm. “Women are ‘fitted’ into a theoretical model which developed without women’s experiences as a framework or validation point” (Ollenburger and Moore, 1998, pp.14).

Besides, women’s inferior position in the labour market is taken for granted. Since women are believed to be different from or even inferior to men biologically and

physically, the fact that women are not suitable to work seems to be inescapable. These theories do not question why women's difference from men is a disadvantage to their work.

### ***3.1.2 Neo-classical economic theorists rationalize gender inequality in the workplace***

Despite the fact that neo-classical economic theory is an economic theory rather than a sociological one, it also develops its understandings and explanations towards gender inequality in the workplace. Different from those classical sociological approaches, neo-classical economic theory does not espouse the assumption that women are not suitable for full employment. Rather, this approach tries to analyse the problem in economic terms of demand and supply in the labour market, competition, human capital, free choice and so on.

Generally speaking, this perspective takes a human capital approach to explain the phenomenon of gender inequality in the workplace. It assumes that economic activity is governed by free choice of individuals who desire to maximize their utility. It also assumes that everyone chooses his/her occupation rationally so that the earning capacity units, or the so-called units of human capital, are maximized within a given finite and certain lifetime. Human capital theorists see it as sensible and rational for men to invest in human capital through acquisition of skills, qualifications and experience because, traditionally, men are considered as the breadwinner of the family. Their wages are thought to be the main income of the family. By contrast, since women have to focus on taking care of children and domestic responsibilities and they foresee their intermittent labour force participation pattern, they tend to invest less in their human capital when comparing with men. In other words, human capital theorists believe that

employment is important to men but not important to women, so that there is a great difference between women and men in investing in their human capital. To men, work is life long, but to women, it is not.

According to the economic principle, since men are more willing to invest in their human capital and they can gain more skills, knowledge and experience, their productivity is higher and can finally increase their market value in the labour market. On the contrary, since women are not motivated in investing in their human capital, their productivity and market value are lower than that of men. Based on the above, a rational choice can be easily made by employers. Employers will prefer male workers to female workers.

As a result, there is a marked difference between women and men in the workplace in terms of their pay, benefit, status, promotion opportunities and so on. Even if some women do participate in the labour market, they are only clustered to low paid and low status occupations as compared with men (Crompton and Sanderson, 1990; Hyman, 1992). Thus, a clear sexual division of labour, that is male worker and female home maker, is created. Such sex role stereotyping is further reinforced through women's self-fulfilling prophecies. As women's employment is always thought to be unstable due to their domestic burdens, they will not perceive themselves as good as the male workers. The more they perceive themselves as less skillful and are lacking experience, the more likely they are willing to be employed for lower waged job. They will then internalize the image of themselves that women are less skillful, less knowledgeable, low productivity and in lack of experience. As a result, a vicious cycle is created.



As well, since human capital theorists believe that most women would follow similar routes and make similar choices, this can further explain the aggregate phenomenon of gender segregation in addition to individual cases, without referring to other macro social and cultural structures.

From the above analysis, the neo-classical economic paradigm uses economic and mainly human capital theories to explain the differences between women and men in the workplace. It obviously puts the issue of gender inequality in the workplace as a matter of individualistic concern and choice. As said before, the human capital theorists see women's option for not developing their own human capital based on their overwhelming domestic orientation. Taking care of the family and domestic responsibilities consume women's time and energy and hinder them from getting skills, improving their qualification and increasing their work experience. As a consequence, they tend to have less skills, poorer qualifications, less experience, lower productivity and, finally, lower market value. It is also the main reason that most employers prefer male workers to female workers. Such a position implicitly justifies why women can only occupy jobs with lower pay, and find it more difficult to access better positions.

I would say that this perspective, to a great extent, tries to rationalize the phenomenon of gender inequality in the workplace. Once again, the human capital theorists see women's decision as a rational choice and as having nothing to do with gender inequality. Women choose to invest their time and energy in the domestic sphere rather than in the work sphere. It is their "free choice" in economic terms. Thus, human capitalists consider women's lesser aspirations towards paid work as normal and rational. As a conclusion, the various differences between women and men, in terms of

pay, benefits, promotion opportunities and so on, in the workplace is a reasonable outcome and can be well explained by economic and human capital theories. On the whole, gender inequality does not exist.

The approach of neo-classical economic theories in explaining gender inequality in the workplace has been widely criticized. As stated by Sinclair and Redclift (1991), the fundamental problem of this perspective is the circular type of reasoning. Possessing a low level of human capital appears to be both the cause as well as the consequence of women's undesirable employment situation. This perspective recognizes but fails to explain the nature and extent of the differences between the two sexes in the acquisition of human capital and the explanation given by neo-classical economic theories seems to be over-simplified. In addition, the theories cannot explain why it is women instead of men who have to stay at home and take care of the whole family. "Personal choice" or "free choice" by women, provided by these theories, is not a convincing answer to the question. Unequal power distribution between women and men, especially within a family, is neglected. As stated by Salaff (1981), very often, one member of a family would suffer for the sake of the benefit of another member with more power. Thus, many women choose to stay at home and to be full-time home makers because they have a different gender role and have to face a different structure of opportunities to men in the workplace. It is not their "free choice" or "rational choice" based on full calculation. From the above discussion, I would say that this perspective frames the matter at no more than a descriptive level instead of at an analytical level, reducing women's unequal employment situation to an individual issue.

Neo-classical theories assume that there is a perfect labour market operation where effective distribution and differentiation are taking place. This labour market is emphasized as value-free. However, none of these assertions is correct. The labour market is never a perfect market and does not operate according to the principle of perfect competition. The roles of discrimination in recruitment, placement, evaluation and promotion as well as the devaluation of work performed by women are ignored. Besides, as pointed out by Sinclair and Redclift (1991), Hyman (1992), Milkman and Townsley (1994), the labour market is never value-free and is not a gender-neutral context. The neglect of gender bias in these theories only makes them gender blind and, thus, cannot explain the existence of gender inequality in the workplace. In fact, the mechanisms and processes that lead to the differences between the two sexes in the workplace and to gender division of labour in particular in the work sphere, are themselves gendered. Various forms of discrimination and prejudice exist everywhere in our societies, including in the labour market, that hinder women's employment. Thus, the labour market is neither a value-free market nor a perfect labour market with perfect competition.

From the above analysis, I would say that neo-classical economic theories fail to give an account to the existence of gender inequality in the workplace. The use of economic terminology in analyzing the differences between the two sexes in the workplace is overemphasized. As Still (1997) has argued, the inequality between the two sexes in the workplace is concealed by a purportedly neutral economic discourse, which portrays employers and employees as equal and free agents. In most cases, it makes gender inequality in the workplace invisible. Unfortunately, most of the concepts and issues discussed here are still influential in Hong Kong. In the later

chapters, we will see that many of the respondents of this study try to make use of these concepts in understanding gender equality in the workplace.

### ***3.1.3 Liberal feminism advocates equal opportunities in the workplace***

In the liberal feminist tradition, the cause of women's oppression is identified as their lack of opportunities in employment and in education. They point to "sexism", which consists of prejudices and discriminatory practices against women as well as taken for granted beliefs about the different roles between women and men. Sexism forces women and men into assumed rigid character-based roles, denies the community the full range of talents and potentials available in the population, diminishes women (Ritzer, 1996). All these result in women's lack of opportunities in employment and in education. Therefore, liberal feminism's main trust is that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints blocking women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world. Because society has the false belief that women are by nature less intellectually and physically capable than men, it excludes them from the labour market, the academy and the forum. The existence of the sexual division of labour based on these false beliefs restricts women's access to work sphere, burdens them with household responsibilities and eventually produces gender inequality in the workplace.

Liberal feminists see nothing of particular value about the private sphere. Instead, the private sphere consists of the endless round of what they consider as the demanding, mindless, unpaid and undervalued tasks associated with housework and childcare. Women are excluded from the true rewards of social life such as money, power, opportunities and status which can only be attained in the public sphere. They question

the primary status of women as mothers and housewives, which makes women's careers discontinuous as they have to move out of the labour market to produce and rear children and thus restricting women's access to the work sphere.

Thus, according to the liberal feminists, the solution for change is for women to gain opportunities. It is believed that, if women and men are given the same opportunities, women can achieve what men can. The creation of equal opportunities, particularly in education and in the labour market, is the main aim of liberal feminists. To make the rules of the game fair and to make certain none of the runners in the race for society's goods and services is systematically disadvantaged are the most important to them. In other words, the task is seen as the elimination of barriers to free competition between women and men and the putting in place of rules of competition which are not discriminatory. The liberal feminists try to pursue this aim through the introduction of anti-discrimination law and policies. In real practice, they ask for gender justice, pay equity in wage work, reproductive choice, equal parenting, gender-free schooling for young children, changing discriminatory legislation, reform of institutions.

In Hong Kong, we have the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) which were passed and set up in 1995 and 1996 respectively. There is no doubt that these derive from the liberal tradition. As also suggested by liberal feminism, the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the promotion of equality of opportunity are the target of the SDO and the EOC (EOC, 1998; EOC, 2000; EOC, 2002). It is hoped that all suitable people can compete equally and effectively on the basis of their abilities, aptitude and knowledge in employment.

All these reflect that both the SDO and the EOC share much commonality with the liberal feminism.

To the liberal feminists, nobody benefits from existing gender inequalities; both women and men are harmed because the potential of females and males alike is suppressed. In Hong Kong, the SDO and the EOC also follow this assumption. The anti-discrimination law applies to both females and males and stipulates equal protection for women and men. Both women and men can be discriminators and can be victims of discrimination. In fact, according to the EOC, the SDO is considered a “gender-neutral” legislation in which women and men are thought to have “equal chance” to be discriminated.

By advocating both sexes can be discriminated and by concentrating on women’s equal inclusion into the workplace and education, women’s similarities to men, instead of their differences, are emphasized. Liberal feminists speak in terms of women’s “sameness” to men and they take a “sameness” approach and strategy in solving the problem of gender inequality in employment. Their political agenda would simply ignore and deny the differences between the two sexes. This is also the first clear division of the women’s movement into “sameness” and “difference” camps in the history of feminism. It started to occur in the period between the two world wars when massive numbers of women entered the labour market and rejected their traditional roles as mothers and housewives (Bacchi, 1990; Williams, 1996; Allen, 1999). In order to fight for better employment opportunities and wages, the liberal feminists have to stress that women are no different from men.

On the whole, liberal feminism is concerned to uncover the immediate forms of discrimination against women and to fight for equal opportunities by legal and other reforms. Thus, it typically focuses its attention on formal equalities and gives us a version of equality that is fundamentally bounded by the forms of the law. To the liberal feminists, the best way to promote gender equality is to guarantee the provision of equal opportunities in our society. Equal opportunity between women and men is therefore thought to be the only channel to achieve gender equality.

There is no doubt that liberal feminists have achieved the extension of most rights to women especially in the Western countries. However, their assumptions and strategies are not without criticism. Most of these critiques attack the liberal and individualist approach in analyzing gender inequality.

That liberalism and feminism share some common history is widely agreed in the literature (Eisenstein, 1981; Walby, 1986; Weedon, 1999). Liberal feminism has tended to focus on freedom of choice, individualism and equality of opportunity within existing social relations in analyzing the problem of gender inequality in the workplace. Since liberal feminism has over-emphasized these beliefs and thoughts, no fundamental changes in the structure of work or the sexual division of labour are required. Liberal feminists typically omit a systematic analysis of structural factors in understanding the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. They assume that societal barriers can be overcome by individual effort and government intervention. However, they ignore the ways in which societal and institutional discrimination can influence individual choices to produce patterned inequality. In most cases, fair competition would not lead to equality. In other words, the failure of liberal feminism to address and to challenge the

deep-rooted structures of contemporary society means that relatively little progress is made in transforming the sexual division of labour and the gender inequality in employment. As argued by Chris Weedon (1999), the concepts of individual choice, individual freedom and equal opportunity are problematic and led to a failure to politicize specific areas of women's oppression within the family and within the work situation.

Carol Lee Bacchi (1990) also points out another major weakness of liberal feminism. She states that the male standard is considered as the norm in liberal tradition. It is predicated as the assumption of specific work culture of men, which involves long hours of work and having partners at home to take care of their domestic arrangements. As a result, only those women who are either unencumbered with dependants or have access to enough resources to enable them to employ other women to take over their domestic responsibilities can be benefit. Thus, women who are unable to fit this male profile do not succeed in their employment nor does the equal opportunities legislation benefit them (Jewson and Mason 1986; Cockburn 1991; Watson 1992; French 1995). In particular, the situation of women in lower paid jobs cannot be improved. Therefore, many of the critiques of liberal feminism focus on its goal of assimilation into the current status quo and accepting male's norm standard rather than changing it.

As a result, even though liberal feminists can help to fight for and achieve equality of education, work opportunity and so on, women's role as child bearers and home makers does not change and leads to women's dual role. They are expected to fulfil their role as wives and as mothers as well as to take part in the work sphere. They



become the so-called “superwoman” while participating fully in the workplace, on the one hand, and taking care of their families, on the other. As such, women’s burden is increased. As a conclusion, I want to quote Anne Phillips’s words in criticizing liberal feminism. She suggests that “the question would be relatively straightforward if it were a matter of liberalism being fine as far as it goes, but simply not going far enough (Phillips, 1987).” Even the removal of all legal barriers to female participation in the labour force and the attention on formal equalities only are inadequate, for while few developed societies today will dare to contest the legal equality of women with men, it still remains the case that women receiving lower wages, occupying lower status jobs and part-time jobs.

I have spent a great of space to the discussion of the above theories of gender inequality in the workplace because the various discourses within these theories become more and more influential nowadays. As pointed out by many scholars, the awareness of “difference” or the so-called “politics of difference” have become important in current academic, policy or even legislative development. However, the notion and the discourse of “difference” can be easily manipulated by other discourses, just as the discourses of “biological difference”, “free choice”, “market principle” and so on. As most of these concepts stem from the above mentioned theories, it is necessary to clarify what they mean and where they come from.

### **3.2 Structuralist Perspectives**

Just like the individualist perspectives, structuralist perspectives include a number of theories and positions in analyzing gender inequality in the workplace. Despite their dissimilarities, the theories under this category share some basic assumptions. In

general, these theories are unsatisfied with the notion of individualist and liberal perspectives and draw our attention to the structural factors in the discussion of gender inequality in the workplace.

As stated by R. P. Tong (1998), it is not just unequal and discriminatory policies and practices, as pointed out by liberal feminism, that must be overturned on the way to women's liberation, the capitalist and/or the patriarchal structures or systems must also be uprooted. Focusing on structural factors in analyzing gender inequality is the main theme of Marxist and socialist feminism which will be discussed in this session. In general, Marxist feminism points to capitalism while socialist feminism points to the interaction of capitalism and patriarchy as the source of women's oppression.

### ***3.2.1 Marxist feminism stresses the role of capitalism***

Following the traditional argument of Marxist theory, Marxist feminists argue that the oppression of women is integrally tied up with the capitalist mode of production. According to Marx, capitalists try various means to maximize their profit. In this way, the labour process is organized by capitalists to ensure profitability. Borrowing from this notion, Marxist feminists see women's disadvantaged position in employment as the result of the capital-labour relationship. In analyzing the capital-labour relationship, Marxist feminists employ two important concepts and these are "deskilling" and "reserve army of labour."

Deskilling involves the idea that jobs have been progressively broken into simpler and therefore less skilled tasks. By breaking the work involved in production down into its constituent parts, the capitalists can reduce labour cost. Harry Braverman (1974)

states that, because of deskilling, labour is degraded. The process of deskilling results in a large number of jobs which require less skill including clerical work, service sector and retailing and women are a particularly suitable source of labour for these jobs because they are often thought to be possessing less skills and being less capable than male workers. As such, women are concentrated in lower wage and lower status jobs.

Veronica Beechey (1978) has developed a second strand of Marxist thought in order to explain the position of women in the labour market. She borrows the concept of the “reserve army of labour” and tries to assess whether women constitute part of it. In general, women are uniquely flexible and disposable workers because their domestic role is seen as their primary role in family. Women are less strongly unionized and less likely to qualify for redundancy pay and less eligible for unemployment benefits. As such, women can be manipulated by the employers and are more likely to accept part-time work and lower wage jobs.

More recent research and theories have encouraged a re-analysis of women’s work from a global perspective, for example J. Bernard (1987) and Kathryn Ward (1990). Both of them suggest that a “restructuring of the labour market” is occurring globally. Ward identifies the restructuring of a “global assembly line”, such that women in the Third World perform work in low wage peripheral manufacturing jobs as well as informal work in the home. Bernard identifies this restructuring as the incorporation of women everywhere into a system regulated by the market norm of the Western male world. This regulation by multinationals usually is associated with low pay, poor working conditions, no job security as these informal subcontracted jobs are difficult to be protected by labour legislation and laws. On the whole, no matter what

their arguments are, the Marxist feminists tend to focus on structural factors in determining women's disadvantaged position in employment. In most cases, this structural factor is viewed as capital-labour relation or capitalism. Since Marxist feminism shares similar critiques with socialist feminism, I will discuss these critiques together in the following session.

### ***3.2.2 Socialist feminism stresses both capitalism and patriarchy***

Socialist feminists agree with Marxist feminists that capitalism is the source of women's oppression. However, they argue that Marxist feminists place too much emphasis on the role of capitalism in explaining women's subordination in the labour market. They see that capitalism alone cannot fully explain gender inequality in employment. Thus, they claim that patriarchy should also be taken into consideration as the source of women's oppression. As a result, another framework which links and integrates capitalism and patriarchy and which explains women's employment is necessary.

Feminists who hold this position believe that there is a patriarchal structure which is as important as capitalist structure in determining women's disadvantaged position in employment. Strictly speaking, the term patriarchy is described as "the rule of the father." However, it is used by socialist feminists to describe the domination of women by men. In general, patriarchy can be in the form of ideological and material control over women.

Traditionally, men are breadwinners and women are wives and mothers. There is also a common myth that men go out to work and earn enough to support their wives

and families while women stay at home to take care of the families and do the unpaid household works. Women's wage is seen as less important and it is normal for them to be financially dependent on men, giving men a particularly dominant position. Apart from this, the inequality in power within family should not be ignored. Husbands exert considerable influence over their wives' decision to take paid work. To socialist feminists, this may not be to the advantage of the household, but is done in order that men can retain a position of authority.

There are also other prevailing patriarchal ideologies in our society that have an impact on women's employment. Employer's preference for men exists in most cases because of their prejudices about women's skills, productivity and work, attitudes. Women are usually perceived to be less capable, less skillful, weaker and with low commitment to their work because of their orientation to their domestic situation. These ideologies are believed to be the product of patriarchy. By developing and reinforcing these ideologies, women's oppression is being rationalized. Thus, all these clearly reflect the influence of patriarchy in our society which places women in a subordinated position in employment.

Vertical and horizontal occupational segregation, in which women usually can only occupy lower grade jobs and can only work in a limited range of occupations, help to explain the material base of patriarchy. Vertical occupational segregation exists when men are most commonly working in higher grade occupations while women are most commonly working in lower grade occupations. Horizontal occupational segregation exists where the recruitment of women and men into sex-typed feminine and masculine occupations is very common. At the higher level, women usually engage

in caring and teaching professions. At the lower level, domestic helpers, caretakers, refuse workers and so on, are usually women. Thus, women's paid work is often closely paralleling women's work in the household. As women are constrained by their lack of market opportunities, the crowding of women into a limited number of occupations is the result. The horizontal and vertical occupational segregation place women in a very disadvantaged position. Low wages and low status keep women dependent on men in family and, thus, a power hierarchy is formed. The existence of vertical and horizontal occupational segregation is also considered as a means to marginalize women's paid labour by the capitalists to guarantee a pool of cheap labour in order to maximize their profit. The material basis of patriarchy, that is the control over women's labour, and the exploitation by the capitalists allow men to control women's equal access to employment. In this way, the domination of men over women is reinforced. This material control over women together with the above discussed ideological control over women result in women's disadvantaged position in the workplace.

On the whole, most socialist feminists believe that the two systems, capitalism and patriarchy operate in a reciprocal relationship. Heidi Hartmann (1976), a leading feminist within the socialist framework, claims that capitalism joins forces with patriarchy to dominate women's labour by developing and reinforcing the ideology which rationalizes women's oppression. She proposes a dual systems approach, in which the parallel oppressions of patriarchy and capitalism are analyzed. She further argues that it ensures that capitalists are able to benefit from women's cheap labour whilst men remain dominant in the home. Iris Young (1981) also suggests a similar argument that the root of women's oppression is the integration of capitalism and

patriarchy as an unified system to exploit women in a particular way. However, their accounts are criticized to overstate the degree of reciprocity between the two systems by Sylvia Walby (1990). Walby disagrees and sees frequent tensions and struggles between the two systems, because rival interests between the two systems are so fundamental that the utilization of women's labour by one system is at the expense of the other. But, no matter what their opinions towards the operation of the two systems are, they share a core belief that the two systems are the causes of women's oppression and gender inequality in the workplace.

Based on the above understanding towards women's subordination, socialist feminists believe that women's equality would follow automatically from a socialist revolution. The overturning of social structures, whether these are capitalist or patriarchal or both, is the only solution to end men's domination over women. Therefore, the transformation of the whole of the social structure and social order is needed.

In real practice, apart from asking for "a short agenda" of equal opportunities between the two sexes as proposed by liberal feminism, feminists from this stand also develop the so-called "long agenda" of positive action for women. According to Cynthia Cockburn (1991), the short agenda of equal opportunities policies include anti-discrimination legislation in employment which guarantee no discriminatory practices in recruitment, selection and promotion procedures in employment. The long agenda includes affirmative and positive action. The argument is put that public organizations and companies have to confront proactively the systemic barriers in their rules and practices which effectively barred "women" from access and promotion (Bacchi, 1996).

Targets and quotas are set to require employers to hire a proportion of female employees. Most of the positive action also initiates training, promotion and retention of female staff. One typical example of this is the British sex discrimination legislation. This legislation contains some modest positive action provisions which permit training schemes to be targeted at underrepresented groups such as women (Gregory, 1987). In Hong Kong, the notion of positive action is also included in the Sex Discrimination Ordinance. In a pamphlet published by the Equal Opportunities Commission, it was clearly written that “the SDO allows for positive action whereby, an act targeting persons of a particular sex or marital status, or who are pregnant would not be unlawful if it is reasonably intended to ensure that these persons have equal opportunities in employment, or to provide them with goods, access to services, facilities, opportunities, grants, benefits or programmes to meet their special needs in relation to employment” (EOC, 1995, p.8). Even though targets or quotas are not included in the positive action as those in some Western countries, flexibility in handling special cases is allowed.<sup>1</sup> Apart from fighting for legislative protection, socialist feminists also work in the trade union movement, take part in various political parties and work on the picket lines. It is hoped that a sense of collective identity and group consciousness will be heightened through these works. As highlighted in the previous chapter, there were also a number of women’s organizations set up under the influence of second-wave feminism in Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s. Examples are the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, the Hong Kong Women Worker’s Association, and so on. On the whole,

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<sup>1</sup> This notion may lead to criticisms as positive action can sometimes be understood as “preferential treatment” in which women are considered as “in need of” special treatment. In this case, women become the “problem.” Besides, in some cases, the standards of men are applied in developing positive action and it helps to keep the status quo rather than changing it. (For details, please see Game, 1984; Eisenstein, 1988; Radin, 1991; Thornton, 1995)



socialist feminists insist that social structures are actively gendered and have to be transformed or overturned.

According to Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips, both the Marxist and socialist feminists are concerned with a search for an explanation of the social and structural causes of women's oppression. In general, to Marxist feminists, the structural cause is capitalism alone. To socialist feminists, the causes are the interaction of capitalism and patriarchy. Within this, differences between women and men are regarded as minimal. Unlike liberal feminists' need to argue for women's equality with men on the basis of their sameness, there is no need for Marxist and socialist feminists to fight for women's equality with men on the same basis. Chris Weedon (1999) also states that for Marxist and socialist feminisms, "difference is material." Difference, conceptualized in material terms suggests that gender is constituted in material practices that are governed by various power relations. These power relations include class, patriarchy, race and heterosexism. Even though the issue of sameness / difference between the two sexes is not highlighted, there is a tendency for these perspectives to minimize the differences between the two sexes for strategical reason. As pointed out by Fiona Williams (1996), the minimizing of differences between the two sexes is an important theoretical basis from which to argue for equality and equity with men.

The theories of women's work presented above suggest that we examine the structural characteristics of employment for patterns that situate women at the bottom end of the economic hierarchy. From a Marxist feminist perspective, the structure is capitalism. From a socialist feminist perspective, the structures are capitalism as well as the patriarchal authority system. However, although the arguments provided by these

structuralist feminisms should not be dismissed out of hand, there are problems in using only the structures of capitalism and/or patriarchy to understand the situation of women in relation to men.

Subsequent critiques of structuralist feminisms, whether they are Marxist or socialist feminism, are directed to their over-emphasis of structural forces in understanding women's oppression. Even though socialist feminists employ the concept of patriarchy, it is essentialist inasmuch as it is premised on the inherent capacity of men to exploit women. Then, it is impossible to avoid the assumption that relationships between women and men are inherently unequal and hierarchical (Crompton, 1999). However, the very complexity of gender relations means that domination is never universal and is not inherently unequal and hierarchical. As suggested again by Rosemary Crompton (1998), there can be non-patriarchal relationships in the workplace and by no means all state policies in respect of women may be described as patriarchal.

Moreover, the analysis of macro structures often assumes similar behaviours among individuals in the same position. In the case of Marxist feminism, "all employees" are believed to be exploited by "all employers." In the case of socialist feminism, "all women" are thought to be exploited by "all men." Women are only viewed as passive "dummies" or victims. Such a tone ignores the indivisible part women play as individuals whose subjectivity also contributes to the impact of structural constraints being manifested. Different reactions and resistance by women challenging these structural constraints are also neglected. Therefore, within this kind of analysis, it is impossible to see any social and economic mobility of the individuals.

As pointed out by feminists from other positions (mostly poststructuralist feminists), women are not passive recipients in response to structural and external influences. They are active agents who play a part in negotiating these influences. In understanding gender inequality in the workplace, women should also be viewed as active participants in the construction of working relationships and practices as well as in the construction of various meanings of gender equality in the workplace.

It has also been argued that the concepts of capitalism and patriarchy are ahistorical and lack sensitivity to the situations and experiences of different groups of women. The category “woman”, in most cases, only represents a white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual woman. Thus, the situations and experiences of women of different race, class, age, sexual orientation are obscured. This universal notion of sisterhood is seriously questioned and challenged by black feminists and lesbian feminists in particular.

As a conclusion, feminists espousing structural perspectives are pre-occupied with seeking out the structural causes of women’s oppression. For Marxist feminism, the structural cause is capitalism alone while for socialist feminism, the structural causes are the interaction of capitalism and patriarchy. Since structures are seen as the fundamental causes, the only solution is to overthrow these structures. In order to overthrow these structures and achieve women’s equality, differences between the two sexes and among women are minimized. The structural factors are, of course, viewed as important in understanding gender inequality. But, the emphasis on structural constraints alone results in overlooking women’s subjectivity and experiences of women from different groups.

### **3.3 Poststructuralist Perspective**

The term “poststructuralist” does not have one fixed meaning but generally refers to a range of theoretical positions developed in and from the work of Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva and Lacan (Weedon, 1997). While different forms of poststructuralism vary both in their practices and political implications, they share certain assumptions about subjectivity, language and discourse, as well as meaning. Poststructuralists are inclined to destabilize the perception of a static structure and place more emphasis on the contextual fluidity and ongoing production of meaning and subjectivity through language and discourse. Meaning and subjectivity are considered as not random but also not fixed because they are constantly being produced within particular context. Therefore, poststructuralism represents a shift away from finding a cause for social phenomena, a shift away from essentialist thinking towards an exploration of the meanings of social phenomena.

Under the impelling force of the poststructural thinking, there is a shift in feminist theories and politics since the 1970s mostly in Western countries. The shift is from finding out the causes and sources of women’s oppression to deconstructing the power relations involved. The main poststructuralist approach to gender takes its lead from the work of Foucault on subjectivity, the body, discourse and power as well as the work of Derrida on deconstruction. Generally speaking, poststructuralist feminism rejects a rationalist account of human nature and turns its attention to the instability of women’s subjectivity. Indeed, it tends to focus on the constructed fragility of subjectivity. There is also a recognition of the importance of language, discourse and power as a starting point for understanding how social relations are conceived. Deconstruction, in which

all concepts and ideas involving women should be understood and analyzed presumably outside of the traditional biases and assumptions of the patriarchal language, is emphasized in poststructuralist feminist theories.

With the shift to a poststructuralist thinking, attention is directed to the many ways of being woman, to the varieties of discourses, to the multiplicity of sites at which people engage power (Farganis, 2000). This paradigm shift, therefore, provides feminists with the opportunity to develop more complex enquiries into the relationship between subjectivity, identity, subject position and so on through the process of deconstruction. As argued by Chris Weedon (1997), feminists need a theory that can help our understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and meanings, and between meaning and social value because feminists need to grasp the range of possible so-called “normal” subject positions open to women, and the power and powerlessness invested in them. Only in this way can women’s situation be changed and that equality between the two sexes achieved. There is no doubt that poststructuralist theories can fulfill most of these requirements.

Based on their assumptions and understandings, poststructuralist feminists state that constant and continuous questioning of what is normal is necessary. The term “normal” is usually attached to the adjectives of proper, natural and appropriate. The process of normalization, which declares dissimilarity abnormal and attaches a negative judgment to non-conformity, is questioned and challenged. Poststructuralist feminists believe that only by doing so can women achieve equality with men.

The stress put on difference is an important feature of poststructuralist feminism which I want to further discuss because this feature provides important insights for my study towards gender equality and equal opportunities in the workplace in Hong Kong. In poststructuralist forms of feminism, “difference” can be discussed on two levels: the first level looks at differences between the two sexes and the second at differences among women.

At the first level, the discussion is about the differences between women and men. Modern ideas of sex and gender, differences between women and men in particular, are produced in part by sciences from the eighteen century onwards and these differences are perceived to be discursively produced. It draws our attention to the importance of deconstructing the various discourses around the notion of difference. I believe that this discussion is crucial in the issue of gender equality throughout the history. In most cases, the arguments towards equality between the two sexes are either based on the notion that women and men are the same or the notion that women and men are different. In other words, the notion of differences between women and men always shape our understandings of gender equality.

At the second level, poststructuralist feminists also adopt a skeptical stance towards the focus on women as a group. Accordingly, there is nothing that is essential to the category “women” in their thoughts. As such, the subject of women as a group or as a category only appears as a slippery proposition. In this sense, poststructuralist feminists may be said to be offering the greatest challenge to feminisms, given the earlier accounts of feminists’ concern with the subject of “woman” (Beasley, 1999).

Thus, unlike those feminist perspectives in the previous chapters, differences with men and differences among women are discussed in detail. This stress on differences is an important feature of poststructuralist feminism which makes it distinct to other feminist approaches. It draws our attention to the many ways of being a woman and highlights the very different experiences of women. This emphasis on “differences” generates important insights towards illuminating the complex relationship within the issue of gender equality which cannot be adequately examined by other perspectives.

Poststructuralist forms of feminism have provoked repeated attacks from many quarters, liberal, socialist and radical feminists. Most of these critics of poststructuralism are worried by the postmodern and poststructural critique of meta-narratives and that language and discourse are over-privileged at the expense of material power relations of oppression. As pointed out by Rosemary Crompton (1999), the poststructuralist rejection of meta-narratives and grand theory and with the substitution of the notion of discourse, may run the danger of leaving feminists without a subject to investigate. There has also been a tendency to downplay the significance of structures in explorations of gender under the influence of poststructuralist feminism. However, to many feminists from other positions, structures still count and the theoretical explanation towards gendered structures should not be abandoned. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that there have been requests to retain an emphasis on the necessity to explore and explain gendered structures in order to comprehend the situation of women.

Roseneil (1995), in a review of the future prospects for feminist theory and research, calls for work that combines the insights of poststructuralist feminism regarding the importance of culture and discourse to the constitution of gender with the attention

to the “material.” As suggested by Nancy Fraser (1997), a structural level focused on socioeconomic and material injustice and a discursively constructed level focused on cultural injustice are both needed. To Fraser, the two are intertwined, and in fact, both are pervasive in contemporary society and cannot be reduced to one and other. Similarly, Harriet Bradly (1999) attempts to integrate the two and argues that it is necessary to include both meaning and materiality. She tries to point out the discussion of material structures which frame meanings. Rosemary Crompton (1999) also suggests that feminists work within apparently contradictory perspectives, such as structuralism versus poststructuralism. She has developed a “gender-system approach” which tries to link up structure and agency in the analysis of gender relations in employment. A position of analytical dualism, that is, distinguishing the “parts” from the “people” in order to examine their interplay, but recognizing that neither of them can exist without the other is held by her. In addition, Fiona Williams, Jennie Popay and Ann Oakley (1999) explore “a new framework” for social research, which can incorporate new approaches which emphasize individual agency without losing sight of the other approach which emphasizes structural factors.

However, I would argue that most of these perspectives developed are theoretical assumptions, hypothesis and theories which are difficult to apply to real practices or research studies. How can one distinguish the structural and the cultural? Or how to classify meaning and materiality as suggested by the above feminists? Would it be the case that a new range of dualisms will be set up if we were to distinguish the structural from the cultural and meaning from materiality? As a result, I would choose to apply the poststructuralist feminist framework in my study concerning gender equality and equal opportunities in the workplace.



### **3.4 Implications for the Framework of Analysis**

From the above literature review, we can see that conservative sociologists regard the workplace as the domain for men only and totally neglect the problem of gender inequality in the workplace. Similarly, neo-classical economists makes use of a number of economic terms, such as human capital, individual choice, demand and supply, in explaining women's situation in the workplace, leading to the conclusion that gender inequality does not really exist. Liberal feminists attribute gender inequality in the workplace to discrimination and women's lack of equal opportunities and argue for anti-discrimination legislation and the promotion of equal opportunities. Although liberal feminism has achieved the promotion of equal opportunities in most aspects of our lives and the extension of most civil rights, this perspective is criticized for keeping the status quo rather than changing it. There is no fundamental change in the structure of work or the sexual division of labour. Structural feminism, including Marxist and socialist feminism, focuses on structural constraints placed on women. For Marxist feminism, the structural constraint is capitalism alone while for socialist feminism, the constraint is the interplay of capitalism and patriarchy. Even though structures are crucial in analyzing gender inequality, these approaches are criticized for over-emphasizing the structural factors and overlooking the complexity of gender relations and gender inequality in everyday life. In addition, even though these theories help to explain structurally why women continue to be found in secondary and unskilled positions, they do not tell us much about the women themselves. The interests, concerns, worries, needs as well as the voices of women as workers are hidden. Finally, poststructuralist feminism provides a new way of thinking towards the problem of gender inequality. Instead of focusing on structures, poststructuralist feminism turns its

attention to subjectivity, language and discourse, power, difference. Poststructuralist feminists also argue that we should deconstruct the various meanings attached to the terms in relation to sex and gender. The most important of all, poststructuralist feminism draw our attention to the “processes” how these meanings and understandings are produced, constructed and re-constructed and, how our responses are informed by these meanings and understandings in our daily life. In studying gender equality in the workplace, too much attention has put into finding out various figures and statistics in the issue of gender equality in the workplace. Women’s subjective understanding and perception of gender equality and how they make meanings to gender equality in the workplace are still lacking. As a result, I believe that the emphasis on the process how various meanings are constructed provide important insight for us to better understand the issue of gender equality especially in local and specific context.

Among the various concepts used by poststructuralist feminists in understanding and deconstructing various meanings in relation to gender equality, I believe that the concepts of “discourse” and “difference” are most useful in this research. Borrowing from the ideas of Michel Foucault, Joan W. Scott points out that, “a discourse is not a language or a text but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs (Scott, 1988, p. 35).” Chris Weedon also points out that discourses “are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them (Weedon, 1997, p. 106).” In other words, discourses are closely related to subjectivity and power. Various discourses exist in written forms or in oral forms and in the social practices of our everyday life.

The emphasis on “difference” is also an important feature of poststructuralist feminism. Joan W. Scott argues that meaning is made through implicit or explicit contrast. In other words, “a positive definition rests on the negation or repression of something represented as antithetical to it.” (Scott, 1988, p. 37) Gender difference is an example of this. The definition of male or man rests on the definition of female or woman. Poststructuralist feminists further argue that gender difference is cultural rather than natural, and analyze its role in the constitution of gendered subjectivity. I think this is especially useful in discussing gender inequality in the workplace. Therefore, to analyze various discourses of difference between the two sexes is important in providing the framework to examine how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are constructed, negotiated and even manipulated. As a result, the notions of discourse and difference, borrowing from poststructuralist feminism, provide an important way of thinking about the issue of gender equality in the workplace.

In general, three discourses on sexual difference can be established and these are first, the discourse of “women and men are the same”; second, the discourse of “women and men are different”; and third, the discourse of “women are at the same time different and the same as men” (Scott, 1988; William, 1996; Weedon, 1997).

It is apparent that the meanings of these three discourses are not only different, but also opposing and contradictory. It is also not difficult to discover that these discourses derive from various perspectives and theories of gender inequality which I have already discussed in the previous sessions. For instance, the discourse of “women and men are the same” is the main feature of liberal feminism and structural feminism. The discourse of “women and men are different” is the main feature of biological

essentialism as well as of human capital theory. Finally, the belief of poststructuralist feminism reflects very much the discourse of “women are at the same time different and the same as men.” Actually, implicit in each theory or perspective is its understanding of gender difference.

As pointed out by Chris Weedon (1997), not all discourses carry equal weight or power. Some of these discourses are more powerful and influential than others. As well, some will account for keeping the status quo, but others will give rise to challenge the existing practices. Thus, some discourses can serve the interests of men by reproducing and legitimizing dominant forms of femininity and masculinity, while others can act to resist dominant forms of practice.

In the field of employment, the discourse of “women and men are the same” as well as the discourse of “women and men are different” seem to be dominant. As pointed out by Joan W. Scott (1988), women are usually considered as either the same as men or different from men especially in the workplace. It reflects particular beliefs, values, norms and interests.

Based on the above analysis, the discussion of gender equality is closely related to how people think about the differences between women and men. Therefore, in most situations, our understandings and attitudes of gender equality is affected and based very much on the three discourses around gender difference. Of course, even within the same discourse, there may be different understandings and interpretations of gender equality. Therefore, it is interesting and meaningful to capture how people interpret gender equality and how their interpretations link up with their understandings of

gender differences. In other words, I believe that gender equality has to be understood in the context of beliefs and assumptions about gender difference.

Because the three discourses are so important in understanding the issue of gender equality in the workplace, my study has been structured and framed according to these three discourses. I will investigate how these three discourses operate to construct the meanings of gender equality in the workplace.

The stress on differences among women from poststructuralist feminism also increases our awareness towards women with different backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, I see poststructuralist feminism as a way of including previously marginalized voices. For those who do not have their voices heard in history, the paradigm of poststructuralist feminism makes a theoretical case for inserting the heretofore unarticulated voices of women in new discourses. This perspective can give voice to women's narratives of their experiences of power relations in localized sites of struggle. These sites can be in schools, shopfloors, hospitals, markets and so on. In my study, the site is the workplace.

Based on the above, I would employ the poststructuralist feminist framework in my study towards equality and equal opportunities in the workplace. I would try to find out how women's understanding of male/female sameness and differences affect their perceptions on equality and equal opportunities in the workplace, that is the relationship between their understanding of sameness and differences, and their understanding of equality and equal opportunities in the workplace. I will explore the way in which the ideas of sameness and difference are utilized by groups, such as employers, colleagues,

friends, relatives and so on, in their representations of women as workers and employees through interviewing women and from their points of view. I also want to demonstrate how arguments based on these ideas help formulate a view of women themselves. By doing so, I believe we need to deconstruct further the meanings women attach to biological difference between the two sexes, traditional sex roles, the sexual division of labour in the workplace, equality, equal opportunities, work, qualification and so on. It is, therefore, necessary to deconstruct the power relations that women experience in their workplace so as to unmask the normalizing procedures and processes involved.

So, which aspects of work life should be included in this study? The answer to me would be 'All'. These may include the sexual division of labour in the workplace; the nature of the job, recruitment; promotion; job distribution; evaluation and assessment; relationship with employers and colleagues, employment history as well as those aspects of the working life my informants find important. I purposely want to include all of them, because even a small thing can be very important in determining women's perception and subjectivity. Therefore, it is necessary to include these "messy" details of life, mostly connected with bodies, to explore the operations of power.

In this chapter, I have, first, introduced different perspectives in analyzing and explaining gender inequality in the workplace. The assumptions, theoretical frameworks, solutions as well as their strength and weakness have been discussed. By utilizing some of the insights offered by poststructuralist feminism, I have formulated the theoretical framework of my study towards gender equality and equal opportunities

in the workplace. In the next chapter on methodology, I will highlight the methodology and methods which I have employed in this study.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Methodology**

In this chapter on methodology, I will illustrate the methodological design of my study and the considerations behind it. I will first of all introduce the approach of this research. Feminist research methodology, which will be used in this research project, will be discussed. Then, I will try to discuss the research methods which will be employed in this research as well as the research process. Finally, the limitations of this study will be discussed.

#### **4.1 Approach of the Research**

Research methodology and method are about how we acquire knowledge including the selection of perspectives, strategies and techniques, and thus are important in the whole research project. Generally speaking, research methodology refers to theorizing about research practice while research method refers to particular tools for research (Harding, 1986). According to W. L. Neuman (1997), the suitability in answering the research question is the most important criterion in choosing the research methodology and the approach of the research. Critcher, Waddington and Dicks (1999) also point out that the methodology should be selected and designed by the nature of the research questions being posed. In other words, the nature of the research problem is the most important criterion in choosing the research methodology and the research methods. In most cases, the choice is always between quantitative research methodology and qualitative research methodology. I want to stress that this choice is not simply or purely technical matter.



It also involves epistemological considerations, philosophical considerations as well as the suitability in answering the research question.

Generally speaking, positivist form of quantitative research methodology is considered as a scientific research methodology and its methodological principles are viewed as value-free, neutral, objective and rational and that quantitative research methods emphasize the production of precise and generalizable statistical findings. Therefore, research findings based on quantitative methodology and methods are considered trustworthy. This positivist form of quantitative research methodology is the most common understanding of quantitative research methodology.

On the other hand, qualitative research methodology and qualitative research methods emphasize depth of understanding such as the attempt to tap people's experience (Rubin and Babbie, 2001). A. Bryman (1988) also defines qualitative methods as "an approach to the social world which seeks to analyse the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied." Thus, it is true to say that these two methodologies are very different. In fact, there have been a lot of epistemological debates between different versions of positivism (usually refers to quantitative methodology and methods) and interpretivism (usually refers to qualitative methodology and methods).

It is undeniable that positivist form of quantitative methodology is largely criticized by many feminists. Feminist criticism of positivist form of quantitative research methodology and methods is directed toward the philosophical assumptions, general quantitative research process, quantitative data and data analysis. Among most

of these criticisms, I believe that three of them are especially important and are the main reasons why I have to abandon the use of quantitative research methodology and methods in my study.

First, positivist form of quantitative research methodology and methods are criticized by many feminists as not free from the male bias and androcentrism (Reinharz, 1983 and 1992; Mies, 1993; Chan and Leung, 1999). Such androcentric bias prevails in practically all disciplines, in most social research work done through centuries of scientific quest. Many of these traditional approaches to social research are gender blind and promote sexist and patriarchal ideology as well as ignoring issues of concern to women. As my research on gender equality in the workplace is aimed at finding out the perceptions and attitudes of women towards gender equality and how these perceptions and attitudes are developed and constructed, I cannot deny my concern over the problem of gender inequality in the workplace and cannot withhold siding with the women employees. I hope that my research can act as a starting point to understand how gender equality can be constructed in our daily life so that changes can be made. Because of all these considerations, I also hope that I can avoid the androcentric bias and male dominance in every aspect of my research, including the choice of research methodology and methods.

Second, many feminists also point out that positivist and assumed “objective” quantitative research methodology and methods can only help to keep the status quo and reinforce male dominance in social research (Harding, 1987; Hekman, 1992; Mies, 1993; Stanley & Wise, 1990, 1993; Chan & Leung, 1999). “Scientific” and “objective” principles in quantitative research, which are considerably influenced by positivist

approached adopted by the natural sciences, are always questioned by feminist researchers. Feminists state that objectivity, neutrality and value free are impossible and sometimes undesirable. Some feminists even cannot accept the idea that objectivity is a valuable goal (Kerlinger, 1979; Jayaratne, 1993; Chan & Leung, 1999). Similarly, quantitative data, which is thought to be very objective, is also criticized by many feminists. To most of them, even though quantitative data and numbers may be accurate, these data and numbers cannot convey an in-depth understanding of or feeling for the persons under study. As pointed out by Toby Epstein Jayaratne (1993), no matter how thorough the questions in quantitative research, these quantitative data can only provide a simplistic and superficial view of human behaviour and attitudes. In my research concerning gender equality and equal opportunities in the workplace, what I am looking for are explanations, processes and perceptions rather than numbers and statistics, such as “numbers of women who...” Experiences, meanings, motives, feelings and emotions that I want to explore cannot be measured in any objective way. I am also looking for depth rather than breadth and the only way to achieve this is by careful listening to and hearing what my respondents themselves say about their experiences and their feelings in their workplace. Unfortunately, quantitative research methodology and methods cannot fulfill these requirements.

Third, the emphasis on the emotional detachment of the researcher is also challenged by many feminists. Researchers are advised to suppress their emotions, feelings and opinions in order to produce objective data in quantitative research. Researchers should keep themselves neutral, rational, uninvolved and objective in the whole research processes. However, is it possible to suspend one’s feelings totally in the research process? In my case, identification with other women and the involvement

of my feelings seem to be inevitable in doing my research on gender equality in the workplace. I think that, sometimes, the involvement of my feelings and the identification with the respondents are necessary. It can help me to put myself into their shoes and so I can better understand their situation and feelings in the research. I believe this is very important in my research. One may then argue that the identification with the respondents and the involvement of feelings will lead to bias in the research. However, as suggested by Chan and Leung (1999), rejection of emotional detachment as perceived by traditional research methodology does not mean that bias is allowed. What we are suggesting is the openness of a researcher in perceiving and integrating different aspects and explanations. Similarly, Ann Oakley (1981) also criticizes research approach of masculine styles of detachment and objectivity in doing social and feminist research. In particular, she emphasizes that interviews, a common qualitative method, is social transactions, in which there is an implicit exchange. In a similar vein, Maria Mies (1993) also points out that the postulate of value free research should be replaced by conscious partiality, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects.

In recent years, especially in the Western countries, there has been a tendency for social researchers and feminist researchers to combine the two types of research methods, for example are Riessman (1990), Oakley and Rajan (1991), Sprague and Zimmerman (1993) and Walters (1993). All of them not only point out that quantitative research methods and quantitative data can be used in a "non-positivistic way", but also reject a simple quantitative/qualitative dichotomy. This discussion is very important. They point out that "hard" data are sometimes useful, especially at the level of policy-making and clarify that what should be rejected is positivism instead of all quantitative

methods and data. Thus, in selecting and designing research methodology and methods, one should be cautious and should not be guided only by any principled epistemological or theoretical position.

Based on the above considerations and the purpose and nature of my research, I will employ the qualitative research methodology and method in my research. This research approach has a number of advantages which, I think, are important. First, it is believed that this approach more easily avoids androcentric bias and can minimize gender inequality. Since the aim of my research is to understand how women think about equality in the workplace, the qualitative research approach, which emphasizes depth of understanding, can help to obtain a thick description of women's perception and experience towards gender equality in the workplace in its full complexity. This approach can give voice to women and therefore avoid androcentric bias. Second, qualitative methods can provide more flexibility and are powerful in studying contemporary phenomena within a specific context (Olesen, 1994). In my research, I seek to gain insight into the subjective meanings of women's perceptions of gender equality in the workplace and how these perceptions are constructed in discourse and social texts, and these may involve many situations and circumstances which cannot be predicted before hand, making flexibility very important. Finally, qualitative research methods are also viewed as being sensitive to women's experiences seen in their own terms. They are also seen as empowering women in their efforts to work for change (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1993). I believe that the above strengths and advantages of qualitative research are crucial in my study and can fulfill the purpose of my study. As being discussed in Chapter 2, there have been already a lot of quantitative research and studies on exploring various figures, statistics and numbers related to gender equality in

the workplace, and I think it will be more meaningful to concentrate my work in examining the less explored area, and that is, the subjective meanings of women. As a result, the qualitative research methodology and methods will be used in this research.

As my research is about the construction of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace, it can be considered as a kind of women's studies. I have to admit my empathy towards woman workers and my feminist commitment in choosing this research topic. Thus, I find it necessary to treat my research project as feminist research with feminist considerations.

Nearly every feminist agrees that there is no single feminist research, feminist research methodology and method. Thus, it is difficult to define what feminist research and methodology are. Despite this, it is generally agreed that feminist research and feminist methodology should involve practices that will minimize harm to women and limit negative consequences (DeVault, 1999). Chan and Leung (1999) suggest four guiding principles for feminist research and I find them important. The first principle is that in doing social research, the gender dimension should be treated as the central concern. The second principle concerns rapport building and that respondents should not be treated simply as a data producing machine. The third principle is to be aware of the power inequality that exists between the researchers and the respondents. The fourth principle refers to conscientisation and empowerment in which research should be treated as a praxis for social change. As my research is located in women's study, I believe it is necessary to follow these four guiding principles because, as a woman researcher, I understand very much that my study is an integral part of an emancipatory struggle. I intend my research to be sensitive to gender inequality and the power

relations between the researcher and the respondents in the research process. I also hope that my research can “bring women in” as suggested, by Marjorie L. DeVault (1999), that is, to find out what has been ignored, censored and suppressed by giving voice to women themselves.

As a result, qualitative research methods together with the four guiding principles in doing feminist research will be used and applied in this research.

## **4.2 Research Method**

There is not just one qualitative research method. Methods, like interviews, case studies, oral history, participant observation are common qualitative research methods and are commonly adopted in doing qualitative research. Each of these methods has its own strengths and weaknesses. Thus, the use of appropriate research methods is also important in the whole research. In this research, in-depth interviews will be used towards collecting data.

### ***4.2.1 In-depth interview***

An in-depth interview is a conversation in which the researcher encourages the respondents to express in detail and in their own terms their opinions, views, attitudes, experiences, emotions, feelings and so on, that are relevant to the research topic (Walker, 1985; Langley, 1987). In-depth interviews allow the researcher to explore and capture the respondents’ point of view and perceptions as well as the ways in which the respondents create meaning from their diverse life experiences. Interviewing can have a wide variety of forms, it can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. It can also

be implemented as an individual interview or a group interview. In my research, semi-structured and individual interviewing will be used.

Individual interviewing refers to face-to-face verbal interchange and it has the advantage of keeping the content of the interview confidential. It also allows the respondents to express and to share their points of view and experiences freely without the presence of other people except the interviewer. Semi-structured interviewing refers to a situation in which an interviewer has a brief set of questions in mind. It is located between unstructured interviewing and structured interviewing. Unstructured interviewing is an unplanned and unanticipated interviewing in which no predetermined set of questions is required. It provides extreme flexibility but the researcher may lose her direction sometimes. Structured interviewing, in which all respondents receive exactly the same set of questions which are asked in a same sequence, minimizes flexibility in the research (Rubin and Babbie, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Unlike both unstructured and structured interview, semi-structured interview, on the one hand, provides a greater breadth and more room for variation according to the response of the interviewee, and, on the other hand, it avoids losing direction in the process of interview. In other words, a semi-structured interview can allow the researcher to pursue relevant information in any direction that seems appropriate but without losing direction totally. Flexibility, which is important in the whole research process, is ensured. Therefore, semi-structured and individual interviewing can guarantee flexibility of the interview and can allow the researcher to maintain privacy and the context of the interview confidential, clarify vagueness and avoid misunderstandings, probe detailed views, adjust questions, change directions, uncover new clues as well as open up a new dimension of a problem when necessary. Because these strengths and advantages,



semi-structured individual interviews can best fit my research purpose and nature, and it is the main research method in my study.

Multiple interviews are necessary in this research. Except for two of the respondents who are friends of the researcher, other respondents did not know the researcher before the interview. Since a trust relationship cannot be built up in a short period of time, especially when facing someone newly known, it is necessary to spend some time for both the researcher and the respondents to become familiar with each other. I believe that a trust relationship is especially important in this research, because in the course of the interview, we may come across some unhappy and bad situations, experiences or feelings in the respondent's work life and it is not easy to share these with someone newly known. Thus, a warm-up period is necessary. As well a multiple interviewing strategy also allows the researcher to clarify vagueness and to go into the detail of those important dimensions which were missed out in the previous interview. In general, two to three interviews were organised for one interviewee.

Each interview lasted for one to two hours and all interviews were recorded and transcribed later with the prior consent of the respondents and these transcripts were used for this research only. All interviews were conducted either in the interviewees' offices, nearby restaurants or in my office according to their convenience and comfort. The guidelines of the interview can be found in Appendix I.

#### ***4.2.2 Sampling and respondents***

Since the aim of this study is not to gain statistical representativeness, probability sampling is not necessary. Thus, convenience sampling was employed in this research.

Twelve cases were selected for interviewing. Two of the respondents are friends of mine; another is an active member of a local women's group who was introduced by a staff member of this group. The other nine respondents are the colleagues, friends and relatives of my friends.

I had purposefully selected cases from very different backgrounds, in terms of age, marital status, number of children, education, financial situation, place of birth (in Hong Kong or in Mainland China), occupation and so on. This variety of sampling can help capture the diversity of perceptions and understanding of gender inequality in the workplace. By including respondents from heterogeneous backgrounds, more useful and meaningful insights about the issue can be generated. Therefore, I believe that the sample I have selected for interviewing can yield a more comprehensive understanding of my subject of study. Some may readers query why the voice of men is not included in this study. I agree that it is also interesting and meaningful to understand how male employees perceive gender inequality and equal opportunity in the workplace. However, I want to concentrate my time and energy in studying women workers who are usually being neglected and ignored. Besides, as the aim of my study is not to compare women's and men's perceptions and attitudes towards gender inequality, there is no need to include men in the sample. I think I have to leave this project for those who are interested in it.

I used pseudonyms for all respondents to maintain confidentiality. The age range of the informants was from 23 to 52 at the time of the interviews. Seven respondents were married and five were single. Among those married, six had at least one child. Except one informant, who was a part-time worker, other informants had full-time job.

Their income ranged from \$2,000 to \$90,000 Hong Kong dollars per month. They come from very different industries and occupy different posts, ranging from casual worker, school amah, sales, clerical worker to supervisor, manager, social worker and doctor and so on. The detailed profile of the informants is listed in Appendix II.

#### **4.3 The Process of Data Collection**

In this session, I would like to describe the process of data collection for this research. In general, the process can be divided into three stages.

##### ***4.3.1 Interviews with staff of local women is agencies***

I started interviewing various staff member of local women agencies from January 2001 onwards. Four staff member from the Association for the Advancement of Feminism and the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association were interviewed. In total, five interviews and sharing sessions were conducted within three months. All of these were experienced workers in working with and for women workers in Hong Kong. I have also joined some of the meetings and conferences held by these organizations as well as by the Equal Opportunities Commission. Most of the contents of these meetings were about women and employment, such as the issue of sex discrimination in employment, equal pay for work of equal value, the issue of part-time jobs and so on. There were several purposes to leave these interviews and attend these conferences. First of all, I have to admit that even though I have great interest in the research topic and have studied it a lot, I have no front-line experience in working with women workers. Most of my knowledge about women and employment derives from books rather than from field experiences. Thus, I find it necessary to know more about the various situations of women workers in Hong Kong. Experiences are always as

important as theories. Through sharing with and interviewing these staff members, who have excellent experiences and knowledge about women and employment, my knowledge and understanding of this issue are enriched.

Another very important reason for these interviews and conferences is to gain insights towards setting up the guidelines for the subsequent interviews with the respondents. The concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity are themselves complex, abstract and controversial. It is difficult or even impossible to discuss these concepts in a vacuum. On the contrary, these concepts should be discussed in relation to real life and experience. In fact, it is meaningless to discuss gender equality and equal opportunities without making references to our lives and experiences. However, it is a difficult task. In so doing, one has to be very sensitive and have enough knowledge towards the situation of women workers. These may include understanding of the labour market, the labour laws and legislations, the pay structure, the problems women workers are facing, their concerns and needs and so on. Thus, in sharing with the agency staff and joining their meetings, I had gained valuable insights into women and employment in Hong Kong. I believe it was an important step in the research processes.

#### ***4.3.2 Sharing with members of the Hong Kong Women Worker's Association***

The second stage of research process started from March 2001. After interviewing and sharing with the staff from the local women's group, it was suggested that to use, before formally interviewing the respondents, I could try to engage in some informal sharing sessions with women workers. Therefore, I started as a volunteer tutor in a computer training course organized by the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association. The aim of

this training course was to equip the participants with basic knowledge in computing, which, in turn, could increase their bargaining power in the labour market. There were altogether 12 participants in this training course and all of them were in their middle age. Most of them were unemployed at the time of the course. It was hoped that by participating in a group, I would have more chances to talk and to share with the women members. The problem of gender equality and equal opportunity were also shared in an informal and casual way, such as before and after each training session. I had also conducted some individual sharing sessions so that I could test my interview guidelines. Finally, one of the participants was invited to be my respondent in this research. She was chosen as a respondent because she was an active and old member in this organization. She had joined many local campaigns for the welfare of women workers in Hong Kong. I thought that her unique experiences could broaden the scope of this study.

The participants of the training course provided useful and valuable information for this study. I modified my interview guidelines and ruled out some questions and areas which seemed to be too abstract or difficult to understand.

#### ***4.3.3 Interviews with the respondents***

The final stage of research process started from May 2001 until October 2001. In this phase the of research process, I conducted interviews with 12 women employees with at least two sessions each. In total, I had 30 interviewing sessions.

All the interviews were successful and I allowed me to collect valuable information and experiences from the respondents. In most cases, open-ended questions

have been used so that the respondents had more room to reflect on the questions thoroughly. Most of the questions set in the interview guideline were asked in each interviewing session. In addition, there were many dimensions and areas which were raised in the interviews that could not be predicted before hand. For example, one respondent, who was born in Mainland China, had reviewed and compared her experiences in Hong Kong and in the Mainland regarding the issue of gender equality in the workplace. I believe these unpredictable areas and dimensions have enriched the study.

#### **4.4 Research Limitations**

In this research, a qualitative research methodology and associated methods are used. The main research method is in-depth interviews. In this section, I discuss the limitations of this research.

No research method is ever perfectly flawless and in-depth interviews are no exception. It is true that in-depth interviews also have their weaknesses and limitations. The problem of validity and credibility are also stressed. In-depth interviews rely quite entirely on the researcher's interpretation of the information collected from the respondents. It is therefore inevitably my "own" interpretation of "their" interpretations. Facing these challenges, the first thing I can do is to listen and to hear carefully and sensitively. Skeggs (1997) suggests and I strongly agree that listening and hearing carefully and sensitively is very important for the production of accountable and responsible knowledge. To achieve this, clarifying vagueness and avoiding misunderstanding is important. It is also believed that multiple interviewing strategies can act as cross-checking. I have also attempted to provide much interview material in

this text for readers to develop their own interpretations. As pointed out by Harriet Bradly (1999), “this is perhaps the best we can do in an uncertain post-structural world: to listen to the play of voices and attend to their interweaving narratives.” (Bradly, 1999, pp. 8)

Another solution which is commonly employed by other researchers is the use of triangulation. Triangulation is a strategy which involves collecting information and data from a diverse range of individuals and settings. Triangulation also includes the use of different methods in the process of data collection (Maxwell, 1996). Thus, in this research, apart from interviewing the women employees, I also arranged a number of interviews with staff from various local agencies working for women workers. It was hoped that their opinions and experiences could help reveal the information which I collected from interviewing the women employees.

To sum up, I have discussed the methodological design of this study, including the reasons for adopting the qualitative research methodology and methods. I have also highlighted the feminist guiding principles in doing my research. In-depth interviewing, which is the main research method, and sampling have also been discussed in detail. Moreover, I have also described the research process of my study. Finally, I have discussed the limitations of this research. After reviewing the conceptual framework and the methodological design of this study, we shall now move to the three chapters findings.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Women and Men: Different ?**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapters, I have discussed how the meanings of equality and equal opportunity are closely related to the three discourses surrounding gender differences, whether they are the same whether, they are different or, at the same time, different and the same. People is thinking and arguing in terms of “sameness” or “difference” when they talk about gender equality in the workplace is indeed very common.

In this first chapter dealing with data analysis and findings, I will discuss the understandings and perceptions of and attitudes regarding on gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace and the construction process of the first group of my informants. Generally speaking, this group of women believes that women and men are different in many ways which, they think, are in born and inevitable. Even though they share very similar understandings towards the difference between women and men, they have developed various perceptions and attitudes on gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace.

I will divide the following discussion into three parts. The first part is about how my informants think about the difference between women and men. The second part is about their understandings and perceptions of and attitudes towards the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity. In the last part of the section, the working



experiences of my interviewees that are related to gender inequality in the workplace will be discussed and the process as to how their conceptions towards gender equality and equal opportunity are being constructed through their working experiences will also be discussed.

The understandings, perceptions, attitudes, experiences, the stories, the feelings and the ways of thinking are the focus of this section. Thus, in order to grasp all these, the structure of this part of discussion is also case based. It is hoped that through this structure, the logic and confusion, the continuity and discontinuity in the understandings and experiences of the informants can be identified and high lighted.

Five of my interviewees are classified in this group and they are Ah Wai, Ah Lin, Ah Po, Siu King and Wing Yin. They have made clear at the beginning of the interview that they believed women and men were different. These five respondents are coming from different background, including age, marital status, number of children, educational level and occupations. The number of women in this group is the greatest compared with the other two groups.

## **5.2 Women and men are Different ?**

In this session, I will present the views of my informants towards male-female difference. Generally speaking, this group of informants thinks that women and men are different. Some of them even believe that man is the stronger sex in the workplace.

Ah Wai was in her mid-forties at the time of the interview. She was a mother with two sons and both of them were still primary school students. Because she had to

take care of her children, she could only take up part-time jobs. She was working as a packaging worker in a factory producing lighting. When she was asked to give comments on whether women and men were the same or different, she said,

“I think women and men are absolutely different. They are different in many ways. Men are on the whole taller and stronger in terms of physical strength. They also have a different personality and characteristics. I think men are more calm, logical and clever. On the contrary, women are emotional, dependent and passive. Men are usually career oriented while women are family oriented.”

Another interviewee, Ah Lin shared very similar opinions with Ah Wai. Ah Lin was also in her mid forties and had one son and one daughter and they were both secondary school students. Ah Lin was a supervisor in a food stall. She had the following comments about male-female differences.

“Men are superior in terms of physical strength. Women, on the contrary, are weaker. I think the difference is inborn and no one can change it... Of course, some men are not that strong and some women are not that weak. But, on the whole, men are stronger than women.”

As well as Ah Wai and Ah Lin, Ah Po also said the same thing. Ah Po was in her early forty and had three daughters. She worked as a full-time casual worker in a hospital. She said,

“It is undeniable that women and men are very different. I find that women and men have a very different body figure, personality, characteristic and emotional disposition. In fact, you can easily find out one is a man or a woman from one's face and appearance. Men are stronger, more objective, decisive and calm. Women are weaker, emotional and subjective. One of my friends told me it is something to

do with hormones. I don't know if it is true or not. Anyway, I believe it is inborn and is very difficult to change."

Siu King, another interviewee, also had a similar view. Siu King was 23 years old and was single. She worked as a shopkeeper in a chain shop selling local fashion and it was her first job. She pointed out,

"Of course women and men are different. There are many biological differences between women and men especially after puberty. I remembered I had learnt from class that boys and girls had very different paths of body development during puberty. Boys will grow up to be muscular while girls will grow up to have their feminine figures. In fact, men are always stronger than women. One thing that is always true is that men can never get pregnant."

Finally, Wing Yin also shared very similar opinion with the above interviewees. Wing Yin was in her late twenties and was still single, but she planned to get married the year after the interview. She was working as a clerical assistant in the Water Supply Department. When she was asked to comment on male-female difference, she said,

"I think women and men are absolutely different. God creates the two sexes, a woman and a man, that is Adam and Eva. It will be ridiculous if the two sexes are the same. In fact, women and men are never the same. Men are stronger and tougher. Women are weaker and softer. Women and men are also different in their characteristics, interests, and many other things. I believe it is natural and is something to do with genes and inheritance. So, the difference between women and men is just the natural law."

From the above quotations from some of my informants, it is quite clear that this group of informants believe that women and men are different in many ways. They are thought to be different in physical strength, appearance, personality, characteristic,

emotional disposition, interest and so on. All of my informants in this group attribute the male-female difference to biological predisposition. They all think that the difference is natural and intrinsic. Therefore, it is inevitable and is impossible to be changed.

Another important observation is that most of the interviewees consider man as the stronger sex, especially in the workplace. None of them considers woman as the stronger sex. Men are generally thought to be stronger in physical strength, and more assertive, calm, logical, clever in personality. Men's "natural" strength and assertiveness are also viewed as a crucial credential for career development, for better wages and benefits as well as for higher or even leadership positions in the workplace.

In fact, this discourse of biological accounts of male-female difference shares a lot of similarities with the assumptions of biological essentialist theories and still prevails in the modern era. Women and men are believed to be biologically or intrinsically different. The male-female difference is only constructed as "biological difference", which it is inborn and natural. No one challenges whether this notion of male-female difference can be due to other factors, such as the socialization process, discrimination and so on. Accordingly, women and men are different in many areas. These differences may be due to genetic composition, hormones and brain development, and therefore are thought to be inborn and natural. According to the logic of this thinking, it is inevitable and unchangeable.

### **5.3 Conceptions on Gender Equality and Equal Opportunity**

In this section, I will discuss how my interviewees think about what equality and equal opportunity are and what these concepts mean to them. In spite of the fact that all the interviewees in this group share very similar opinions towards the male-female difference, they develop quite varying views, perceptions and attitudes towards the ways they think about gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. In general, it is very common that most of the interviewees rarely think of this question. There is also an impression that gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace is not an important issue to them especially at this moment in time, when the unemployment rate is so high. Some of them even argue that gender equality is not advantageous and beneficial to women.

First of all, let us look at Ah Wai. When Ah Wai was asked what she thought about gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace, her first response was laugh. She explained that women from her generation seldom talked about gender equality and equal opportunity, whether at home or in the workplace. In her own words,

“Gender equality and equal opportunity is not belong to my generation. Only girls and young women from the new generation will talk about gender equality and equal opportunity. They want to have more freedom and enjoy whatever the other sex has. But, in my generation, it is impossible. People will think that you are rebellious if you do so. Girls are girls and boys are boys and they are considered different. So, they should be treated differently... But, nowadays, girls and young women want to have the same treatment as men.”

To Ah Wai, gender equality and equal opportunity are modern and fashion able things. It is interesting to find that gender equality and equal opportunity that feminists have fought for since many many years, are still very remote and do not belong to Ah

Wai's generation. Ah Wai explained that people would not accept someone of her age to speak for gender equality. They could think that you were too fashion able, just like you were wearing some clothes which were not appropriate for your age.

Ah Wai also said that she seldom thought about what gender equality and equal opportunity meant. What she would think of gender equality and equal opportunity was that these two concepts might be the same. To her, equal opportunity meant no barrier and same chance for women and men. And gender equality meant that women and men should have same treatment and enjoyed equal opportunity. Thus, these two concepts might mean the same thing to her.

Ah Wai also pointed out that genuine gender equality in the workplace was impossible to achieve. It was almost impossible to treat two groups of people in the same way. She used an example to support her way of thinking. She said,

“How can you treat a pregnant woman and a strong man the same way in the workplace. If you talk about gender equality and equal opportunity, can you ask a pregnant woman to work on a construction site ? ”

Even though Ah Wai cannot clearly formulate her understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity, the conversation has provided some important insights. To a great extent, it reflects that gender equality means the same treatment of the two sexes, and that the same treatment means equal opportunity. In general, Ah Wai's understanding is not unique. Her understanding that gender equality and equal opportunity are two very similar things is very popular and is shared by many other interviewees in this study. She also believes that, because women and men are different,

it is almost impossible to treat them in the same way. In other words, gender equality seems to be unattainable and impossible to her.

Another informant, Ah Lin, also developed a quite similar opinion as Ah Wai. Ah Lin believed that gender equality and equal opportunity might be the same. She said,

“Actually, these two concepts are very abstract. I’m not sure what these really mean and what the definitions are. The only answer I can give you is that gender equality and equal opportunity are very similar things. May be, gender equality is too difficult to understand and so equal opportunity is the best way to explain gender equality.”

Ah Lin stressed many times that her understanding might be wrong. She claimed that, as a primary school graduate, she had received not much education, it was difficult for her to understand these concepts. She once said,

“I think I need more education to better understand these concepts.”

The above quotation from Ah Lin is meaningful. Ah Lin tells us that she believes there is a “right and correct” understanding of the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity. In other words, there can be only one definition and the other definitions and interpretations of these concepts seem to be unacceptable.

It is undeniable that the two concepts are abstract to understand and, without further information and leading questions, most informants may not be ready to provide their deeper understandings of these issues. However, none of my informants, except Ah Lin pointed out that it is related to her limited educational background. To Ah Lin, gender equality and equal opportunity are not down to the earth; they have nothing to do with her daily life. To the contrary, gender equality and equal opportunity are very high

level things and quite academic, and only those who are well educated can talk about and discuss them.

Now, let us look at Ah Po, like Ah Wai, Ah Po also had a feeling that gender equality and equal opportunity were not belong to her generation. Similarly, gender equality and equal opportunity were very remote and seemed to be very far away from her. It was also true that she seldom thought about them because it was not necessary. When Ah Po was asked about her understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity, she said,

“I’m not sure what gender equality and equal opportunity are. I guess gender equality is something to do with fairness and equal opportunity may means the two sexes having the same chance. For example, in the past, no women could be firemen. Now, when you talk about equal opportunity, women should also have the same chance and the right to be firemen. This is what I think about gender equality and equal opportunity. But, I cannot tell the difference between these two. Maybe, it is because I seldom think of these things. It seems to be not necessary to think about gender equality all the time.”

Although Ah Po cannot give a more detailed illustration of her understandings towards gender equality and equal opportunity and the relationship between the two, she generally believes that equality is fairness and equal opportunity is having the same chances. From her limited understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity, Ah Po concludes that fighting for gender equality unlimitedly and endlessly is not so good. She explained,

“In my generation, very few people talk about gender equality. Women and men are treated unequally. Most of the girls and women, like me, could not enjoy what the boys and men had in the past. We were not allowed to do a lot of things such as some social gatherings and going out at night. Fighting for gender equality at that time might be necessary.



It was for the welfare of the society as a whole. However, the present situation is different. The economy is so bad and the unemployment rate is so high. Even men with a very good educational level and working experiences are unemployed. I cannot understand why there are still so many women fighting for gender equality in this situation. To them, this is unfair, that is unfair. It seems everything is unfair to women. Personally, I think it is no good and dangerous.”

When Ah Po was questioned why she thought that fighting for gender equality was no good and dangerous, she answered,

“To me, the harmonious relationship between the two sexes is important. Women and men are different and they should perform different roles... Can a man give birth to a baby in the name of fighting for gender equality? I want to make use of this example to tell you that in many cases, gender equality is impossible. I’m also thinking, why there are only women or women groups fighting for gender equality, but not men... I believe that those women, who always asking for gender equality, will give people an impression that they are too demanding, radical and aggressive. Nobody, including me, will like these kinds of women because they may be very selfish and very difficult to go along with. What they know is fighting for their own rights rather than taking into consideration other people’s or men’s feelings.”

Ah Po can clarify why fighting for gender equality is undesirable and dangerous. She expects harmonious relationship between the two sexes and she believes that fighting for gender equality will obstruct this relationship. To addition, to Ah Po, equality between the two sexes has become much better than in the past. Women, at present, can enjoy a lot of things that seemed to be impossible in her generation, such as educational and job opportunity. Thus, Ah Po has a feeling that women are too greedy and never satisfied.

Another interviewee, Siu King, also said that she seldom thought about the issue of gender equality. To her, the development of gender equality in Hong Kong was not

bad. She claimed that she had no concrete idea on what gender equality and equal opportunity signified. What she knew about these two concepts were from TV programs or from the newspaper. In her own words,

“I heard of the advertisement from the Equal Opportunities Commission advocating the concept of equal opportunity between the two sexes. I remembered in the advertisement, an employer should ensure that women and men should have the same opportunity to apply for a job. The employer could not reject to hire a person on the basis of one’s sex. So, I think equal opportunity is this kind of thing. On the other hand, I think gender equality is more difficult to define. It may mean different things to different people. Some may think that this is equal and others may think that that is equal. So, I don’t know what real gender equality is. Sometimes, what you think about gender equality depends on what your position is and what is of benefit to you.”

The comment given by Siu King is also very meaningful and significant. She has pointed out two very important issues. The first one is the influence of the Equal Opportunities Commission. Siu King makes it clear that her understanding of equal opportunity mainly derives from the Equal Opportunities Commission, probably from advertisements, TV programs and newspapers. She claims that she has not read or listened to the advertisements, TV programs and newspapers very carefully. Her understanding of equal opportunity is only a very rough impression. However, Siu King’s rough impression constitutes her entire all her understanding of equal opportunity.

Another important issue pointed out by Siu King is the idea that when people talk about gender equality, they may involve their own position, benefit and advantage. Siu King has an impression that when people talk about or fight for gender equality, they are not trying to achieve justice or fairness, but only promote their own benefit or

advantage. In other words, people are fighting for their own benefit but in the name of gender equality. Thus, peoples purpose in fighting for gender equality may not be achieving justice and fairness between the two sexes. At the time of the interview, Siu King could not remember and give an example of what she pretended, but she confirmed that it really happened sometimes.

Finally, let's look at the opinions of Wing Yin on gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. Once again, Wing Yin pointed out that she rarely thought about the problem of gender equality and equal opportunity. She said,

"I rarely think of gender equality or equal opportunity. Unless you come up with some unequal things in the workplace, you won't think of these."

The comment of Wing Yin shows that she believes in a "problem-centred" approach. She thinks that when nothing happens, she seldom thinks of the problem of gender equality and equal opportunity. Wing Yin attributes her response to the degree of importance of gender equality and equal opportunity in her mind. To her, gender equality and equal opportunity are not so important and she therefore seldom thinks of them. In her own words,

"There are so many things in the workplace I have to pay attention to. I have been already very busy with all my tasks and if nothing happens, I don't think it is necessary to think what gender equality and equal opportunity are because these are not so important when comparing with other things."

She further explained what the "other things" were,

"The other things include my daily tasks which always make me very busy and leave no time and energy to think about the issue of gender equality. These also include my relationships with other colleague because it really makes me exhausted in keeping a good relationship with

them... I think that all these aspects are nothing to do with gender equality.”

When Wing Yin is asked to tell her understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace and what should be included, she replied,

“Honestly speaking, I have no concrete idea on what gender equality and equal opportunity are. Each one has his own understanding and agenda. To me, gender equality is another word of fairness but what for fairness is difficult to say and define. Equal opportunity may be easier to understand. It means women and men should have the right to enjoy the same chance to be employed, to be promoted and to receive the same benefit in the workplace... To me, recruitment, promotion, salary and benefit are common areas in talking about gender equality.”

From the above quotation, it is obvious that to Siu King, the concept of equal opportunity is easier to understand than the concept of equality. To her, gender equality is too abstract and without a concrete definition. As a result, each person has his own interpretation and the meaning of gender equality is shifting all the time. Due to this situation, Siu King is confused and does not know what gender equality is and should be.

It is also important to note that gender equality can only happen in certain sites of our working life according to Siu King. Recruitment, promotion, salary and other benefit are these potential sites. But the relationship between the colleague, which Siu King believed is important, has nothing to do with gender equality.

The opinions and comments from my informants illustrate that even though all of them share similar understandings of male-female difference, they can still develop various conceptions, perceptions and attitudes towards gender equality and equal

opportunity. Generally speaking, none of the informants in this group has a clear and concrete understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. To most of them, the concept of gender equality is abstract and ambiguous, and therefore difficult to understand. On the contrary, the concept of equal opportunity seems to be easier to grasp.

Despite the above, there is also a commonality among the views of the informants. All of them point out in the interview that they rarely think of the issue of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. Some say that this issue is not belong to their generation. Some say this issue is not important. Some even believe that it is no good to think and talk about gender equality all the time.

Most important of all, from the women's statements, it is apparent that the discourse of biological difference is being used to justify their understanding of gender equality. In most cases, this discourse has served to justify and rationalize unequal treatments of women and the dominant position of men.

#### **5.4 The Construction of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunity in the Workplace**

In this section, I will present the working experiences of my informants. The focus will be on the unequal and unfair treatments which are related to gender issues that the informants have come across or experienced in the workplace. It was hoped that, through the sharing of working experiences, the informants can better organize and reflect their ways of thinking about the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. As well, it was also hoped that we could try to find out some important clues as to how the process of construction and the process of engendering are taken place. That is, how the

concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity are being constructed and negotiated in the workplace and how different discourses surrounding these concepts are operated to place women in their present situation.

First of all, we examine look at the case of Ah Wai. Ah Wai was working part-time in a factory at the time of the interview. She took up packaging work and earned around \$80 per day. In her factory, most of the full-time female casual workers earned around \$160 per day while the male casual workers earned more than \$200 per day. According to Ah Wai, this difference in wage was quite significant at the moment when the economy was not so good. She explained that the wage difference was because men had to take up the tough jobs, such as lifting heavy things and that was why it was reasonable to pay them more. On the whole, it had something to do with physical strength, and therefore, she argued, it had nothing to do with gender equality. She said,

“Men are more suitable for doing physical, tough, and possibly dangerous jobs because they are stronger... I think it is reasonable for men to earn more and you cannot say it is unequal.”

Ah Wai believed that men had to undertake the more strenuous tasks and it justified why they got better pay, because women did not need to undertake these tough tasks. In fact, it also implied that women were not strong enough to take up these tasks since women and men were different physically and biologically. As a result, Ah Wai concluded that this practice was not unequal, but was just a very common, normal and traditional practice that no one would query about.

It is in this way that the concept and meanings of gender equality are constructed. Once again, the concept of gender equality is linked with the discourse of male-female

difference, the physical strength of women and men in particular. Since it is generally believed that men are stronger than women, it seems fair and not problem to pay a man more for a job requiring to do strenuous tasks.

However, when the discussion went into detail, especially when Ah Wai talked about the nature of her job, she pointed out that as a female casual worker, she was also required to take up tough jobs as well. She said,

“By definition, we (female worker) are not required to take up the tough jobs. But, the reality is different. We are doing more than our share of work... After packaging, we have to move the products to another location. For male casual workers, they have some kind of machine to help them. For us, we have only our hands. That’s why, some of us may suffer from back injury sometimes.”

She commended further that there was individual difference in terms of physical strength. Thus, sex was not the only factor in determining one’s physical strength. In her own words,

“I think not all men are that strong. I saw some very strong women before. In fact, there are some quite strong women in our factory. Sometimes, the male casual workers will ask for their assistance... But, of course, female casual workers still receive lower wages.”

The experience of Ah Wai makes it very clear that the justification of the men doing strenuous jobs and therefore getting better wages because of their higher physical strength is sometimes a myth. Woman workers receiving lesser wages are sometimes required to do these strenuous jobs. But, because it is “sometimes” required and not the main duty, woman workers can only receive disproportional by lower wages.

When Ah Wai was asked why this did happen and why she and other female causal workers didn't try to challenge the status quo and make some changes, her answer was,

"This question is very difficult to answer... You can say that it is tradition. Sometimes, I do think it is unfair. But, you have no choice... I'm just a small potato and I don't think I can do anything about this issue. The most important is in our Chinese culture, people cannot accept aggressive women. To be serious, when I was young, I was quite radical. I argued with my parents why it was me, instead of my brothers, to be sacrificed (she was not allowed to continue her education due to financial reasons). The only answer I got is because I'm a girl. Since girls are born differently from boys, you cannot compare yourself with a boy and it is nothing to do with fairness. Even though I cannot accept this answer, that's what I can think of - it's our tradition."

As being told by Ah Wai and some other informants, "tradition" is a very powerful factor in constructing gender equality in the workplace. But, what is the meaning of tradition? What does it mean to Ah Wai?

Ah Wai pointed out that tradition was something to do with custom, conventional practice and rule. Tradition was something done by and told by the older people and then passed on from one generation to another. Since Chinese people respected their ancestry very much, it seemed that the rules and practices inherited from them could not be wrong. Also since tradition came from ancestry, it was difficult to explain and clarify. Since tradition was based on the belief and thinking of the ancestry, the younger generations usually had to follow it and it was quite difficult to go against it. Ah Wai commented that tradition was the best answer to most of the questions related to gender and sex and she could not think of other possible answers.



The story of Ah Wai demonstrates very clearly how gender equality is constructed. It is constructed in a subtle and insidious way in our daily life. Gender equality is often constructed within other discourses, such as biological difference, job nature and so on.

After Ah Wai, we are now moving on and examine the case of Ah Lin. Ah Lin was a supervisor in a food stall. She had worked as a cashier in this food stall for many years and she was promoted to be the supervisor three years ago, due to her outstanding performance. She was responsible for supervising 14 staff, including chefs, cashiers, cleaning amah and other casual workers. Ah Lin pointed out that, due to difference in physical strength, all chefs were men. Similar with Ah Wai, Ah Lin did not think it was unfair. She explained,

“I think women cannot stand for in front of the hot and smoky environment inside the kitchen. Have you ever picked up a wok which we are using in our canteen? It’s so heavy that only men with strong arms can handle it... So far, I’ve never seen a woman applying for the post of chef.”

Ah Lin further pointed out that the monthly salary of a chef in her food stall could be as high as \$13,000, even higher than her salary, while the salary of a cleaning amah or a cashier was just around \$5,000. She explained,

“I still think that it is (difference in wage) acceptable. You cannot imagine working more than ten hours in the kitchen. Men are stronger than women are. You can’t bear the working environment in the kitchen... To be a chef, you have to spend some time on training to acquire some skills, but the duties of a cleaning amah and a cashier are much easier and do not need much training and experience.”

Once again, Ah Lin tries to point out that men are superior in terms of physical strength to justify and rationalize the position of chef. Women, on the contrary, are weaker and cannot take up the job of a chef. Due to this biological difference, men are

entitled to take up tough and dangerous jobs, and, of course, are justified to enjoy better wages.

But, when the discussion went into detail, Ah Lin's argument was inconsistent and even contradictory. When she was asked to compare the cooking task of a chef and that of a housewife (Ah Lin is herself a housewife), she said,

"I think the two cannot be compared, it's totally different... Personally, I like cooking and my husband and children always appreciate the food I cook. But, as a chef, you should possess some skills and technique; you have to work systematic ally and very fast, and you need to understand the taste of the customers. Compared with a chef, I think cooking at home is just like a 'child's game'..."

However, Ah Lin failed to further explain why housewives who cook everyday at home could not be chefs. She was also unable to clarify why the skills and technique of a chef was so unique and different from that of a housewife. When the discussion continued, Ah Lin ended her argument with "I don't know" and "It's difficult to say".

When the sharing continued, Ah Lin pointed out that she had not said that women could never be chefs. She also said that women and men sometimes might be the same. Accordingly, the argument provided in the beginning of the interview, that women were not strong enough to be chefs, was just a convenient answer. To Ah Lin, her answer was like a reflex, because everybody talked about it in the same way. Ah Lin also confirmed that she seldom thought of the question of gender equality and the related gender issues in the workplace. Thus, when everyone said that women were weaker and softer in physical strength and not suitable for certain jobs, such as a chef, and when she saw that all chefs were men, without serious thinking, she came up with a quick

conclusion that women were not suitable for the job of a chef because they were not strong and not skillful enough.

Thus, the notions of “I don’t know”, “It’s difficult to say” or “It depends” are meaningful. They represent query, doubt, uncertainty, puzzlement and confusion. They also mean that Ah Lin seldom thinks about the issue seriously.

Finally, Ah Lin pointed out that women could indeed take up a lot of jobs that were thought to be only for men such as pilot, fireman or even chef. But, the fact was women entering these jobs would have to face a lot of problems and they were often treated with skepticism. Women would be made to feel unwelcome, like intruders into an all-male preserve. As a result, the number of women in these traditionally men’s fields was still limited. To her, she would not choose to be one of them in order to avoid unnecessary difficulties. Ah Lin said,

“When a woman enters these jobs, it seems that she is representing all women. If you are successful, people will say that you are a special one. But, if you are not doing that good, people will say that women are no good and are not qualified to take up these jobs... People will also think that you are unusual and strange. It seems that you shouldn’t enter these fields.”

Another interviewee, Ah Po, also shared very similar opinions with Ah Wai and Ah Lin. Ah Po worked as a full-time casual worker in a hospital. According to Ah Po, the post of a casual worker was usually divided into two grades, Grade 1 and Grade 2. Grade 1 was a higher grade and enjoyed higher wage. In most cases, only men could be employed as a Grade 1 casual worker. Ah Po said it was because a casual worker in Grade 1 had to take up strenuous jobs, such as lifting heavy objects, using big vacuum cleaning machines and so on. As a result, most of the Grade 1 casual workers were

male because of their higher physical strength. Since the nature of the job required better physical strength and only men could be qualified, Ah Po thought it was fair. She pointed out,

“I think I cannot be a Grade 1 worker...You can read from my body figure I’m not that strong. In fact, I’m quite slim and petite. Of course, I can manage to do the normal cleaning tasks. But I’m afraid I cannot handle those tough jobs... So, I believe it is fair for men to be in Grade 1 and receive a higher wage.”

Apart from viewing that men had higher physical strength, Ah Po also believed that women and men were different in personality, and men’s personality was thought to be more objective, decisive and calm. She thought that these personal qualities were essential in the workplace. In her words,

“I find that women and men have very different personalities, characteristics and emotional disposition... Most women are very emotional and subjective. These female characteristics are obstacles to their work. Men are more objective, decisive and calm and these characteristics make them more suitable to work outside.”

From the above conversations, it can be seen that the discourse of biological predispositions of women and men, whether it is physical strength or personality, is important in understanding gender equality in the workplace. Ah Po pointed out that due to biological differences between women and men, where men were stronger than women in terms of physical strength, men were justified to take up strenuous jobs and to receive higher wages. She concluded that this was fair.

From the above, the opinions of Ah Po is quite similar to those of Ah Wai and Ah Lin. In fact, Ah Po reaches a similar conclusion through a similar route. However, when the interview went on, Ah Po had adjusted her opinion.

In the very beginning of the interview, Ah Po tried to justify gender differences in the workplace on biological grounds. She pointed out that women and men were different not only physically but also psychologically. She also believed men's "natural" assertiveness and competitiveness often were viewed as a crucial credential for all jobs. Once again, when the discussion went into detail, Ah Po clarified that as a Grade 2 casual worker, she sometimes had to take up strenuous tasks. She said,

"Even though we are in Grade 2, we have to take up the strenuous tasks... Once in a month, we have to clean up the whole office and we have to move some big and heavy furniture. In principle, we can ask those male workers from Grade 1 to do these strenuous tasks. But, in most cases, we prefer doing the tasks by ourselves to save time in arranging and waiting for male workers to do the tasks... The task is tough, but we can manage it."

Ah Po sometimes found her job even more busy and tough than that of Grade 1 workers. According to Ah Po, she was busy all the time because she was responsible for all the cleaning jobs in an assigned office. So, she had to wash the toilet, clean the floor, the window, and other furniture. However, Grade 2 workers did not have to take up these regular duties. In most cases, Grade 2 workers could enjoy a short break everyday while she could not have this benefit.

Thus, biological difference between women and men is not a good and convincing reason to explain the present employment situation of women, even though this discourse is influential in the understandings, perceptions and attitudes of gender equality. Once again, the discourse of the biological difference between women and men is only a myth to justify men's dominant position in the workplace.

When Ah Po was asked why she tried to link biological difference of women and men with gender equality in the workplace in the beginning of the interview, her view was very similar to that of Ah Lin. She replied,

“It seems to be the easiest way to respond to this issue... In fact, everybody says women and men are born differently, so that they should take up different tasks and it is nothing to do with gender equality. It is just common sense. So, when you ask me why male workers and female workers are taking up different posts, I will tell you what I had heard and learnt from other people. I believe it is my ‘reflex action.’ I don’t have to think of it and it’s something like a slip of the tongue. But, when I think of this issue seriously, there is a problem. To a certain extent, biological difference between women and men is only an excuse to naturalize gender inequality in the workplace.”

Once again, men’s physical advantages in the workplace is viewed as only a myth that intends to maintain the status quo. Women workers’ voices on what is meant by gender equality remain hidden behind a workplace agenda dominated by male interests. What is “fair”, “equal” and “equality” is constructed in the atmosphere and situations where the voices from women are being neglected.

Apart from the above, Ah Po also shared her views on the “value conflict” when she came across the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. Ah Po and her husband were both casual workers but are working in different hospitals. Her husband was a Grade 1 worker and she was a Grade 2 worker. As she mentioned before, the nature of the job of the Grade 1 and Grade 2 workers were not so different. But, there was a clear wage difference between the two. Ah Po realized to some extent that this treatment was quite unfair to Grade 2 workers who were mostly of them were women. Thus, as a Grade 2 worker, she recognized that women were treated unequally and unfairly.

However, from another point of view, that was from the view of point a wife, she preferred the present unfair treatment. In her own words,

“As a wife, I hope that my husband is smarter, cleverer and more competent than I am. Of course, I also hope that my husband can earn more than I can. I hope that my husband can have a better career development. Career is in any time more important to a man than to a woman... I just want to be ‘a little woman’. It will make me happier. I think most women do share my point of view and my hard feelings towards gender equality in the workplace.”

The above quotation captures the contradictions and dilemmas at the heart of Ah Po. On the one hand, she realizes that there are unfair and unequal events happening in her workplace. On the other hand, as a wife, she hopes that her husband can have a better career. Facing this value conflict, Ah Po chooses not to think about it seriously and tries to convince herself that she can do nothing to improve the unfair treatment which she receives in her workplace.

From the experience of Ah Po, we can see how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are constructed and negotiated. The meanings are constructed and negotiated in subtle and insidious ways under the influence of different discourses, values and norms in our daily lives. The story of Ah Po shows how she is struggling with the different meanings of gender equality as well as other value systems. Contradiction, confusion and inconsistency are common feelings of Ah Po and the other women. However, I believe that the inconsistencies and confusions might reveal not so much what is wrong with the thought processes of Ah Po as what is wrong with the world. If women’s lives are filled with contradictions, inconsistent ideas and values may best describe and explain them.

After looking at the story of Ah Po, I would like to examine that of Siu King. As a shopkeeper, Siu King believed that this job was more suitable for women than for men. She said,

“Customers usually prefer a woman shopkeeper than a man shopkeeper. They think that women are softer, caring and cheerful. I think women’s inborn personality makes them more suitable for this job.”

Once again, Siu King tried to make use of the discourse of biological difference of women and men to justify her argument. When talking about gender equality in the workplace, Siu King said that the present situation was already very equal and fair to women. In some situations, she even found that men were in a disadvantageous position. Siu King said,

“In my shop, women and men shopkeepers are doing the same jobs. But, in most cases, only men are required to do the strenuous tasks, such as moving and lifting heavy products. I think that as both of us are receiving the same salary, it is quite unfair to men.”

However, Siu King pointed out that female shopkeepers had to handle the cases of difficult customers and other complaints because women are thought to be better in dealing with human relationships. Siu King said,

“It’s really a nightmare. You can’t imagine the situation when someone is scolding at you, but you have to say sorry continuously. May be, it is not your fault, but you have to do so. It’s your job and there is no way you can choose.”

The conversation of Siu King provides us with significant insights when studying gender equality in the workplace. It is apparent that there has been a clear differentiation of work between male and female shopkeepers. To a large extent, this sex segregation of work reflects the prevailing belief and discourse of male-female



difference. It is interesting to note that, even though Siu King and other female shopkeepers have to take up the task of handling difficult customers, she does not think that they are entitled to receive higher wages. But, the male shopkeepers should be better paid because they have to do the strenuous jobs. Thus, it is obvious that the work performed by women is devalued and conceived to be unimportant.

Finally, we are look at the case of Wing Yin. According to Wing Yin, there were conflicts over the issue of gender equality in her office. In her own words,

“In my office, there are sometimes conflicts over this issue. Last month, I heard my male colleagues arguing why female colleagues were not required to do some tough jobs. Of course, the male colleagues said that it was unfair to them. But, to the female colleagues, it was fair because they thought women were in general weaker and not that strong. To me, the arguments from both sides are convincing. So, I don’t know how to make up a conclusion.”

The above quotation illustrates the existence of competing discourses surrounding the concept of gender equality in the workplace. On the one hand, the male colleagues have requested “same treatment” between the sexes. On the other hand, the female colleagues have pointed out their “difference” and have asked for some form of special treatment. This disagreement is a typical example of the equality-versus-difference debate. It is a difficult choice for women. As pointed out by Wing Yin,

“If we insist that women and men are different, even though we can be kept away from those strenuous jobs, we have to admit that we are weaker... The worst is that, in the future, we have no reason to ask for equal treatment with men. But, if we agree women and men are the same, we have to take up these strenuous jobs. So, it is difficult to choose.”

Thus, no matter what their choice is, women are placed in a disadvantaged position. The case of Wing Yin demonstrates how the meanings of difference between the two sexes are constructed and negotiated to maintain the status quo of male domination in the workplace.

From the women's thoughts, it is obvious that the discourse of biological difference between women and men is important and powerful in the discussion of gender equality in the workplace. Men are believed to be stronger, taller, heavier, cleverer, smarter, calmer, more assertive, more decisive than women are. These differences appear to be "natural", because they have persisted over time and almost across cultures, with very few exceptions.

These popular assumptions about physical and biological differences between women and men are usually taken for granted. Men's physical advantages have served to justify and rationalize their dominant positions in employment contexts. Many people, including women themselves, justify unequal employment opportunities and gender inequalities in the workplace on biological grounds.

As Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993) points out "biological theorizing has been used to naturalize, and thereby perpetuate, social inequality (p. 6)." Assumptions about biology still have great effect on gender equality and fairness. At the least, the discourse of biological difference provides the easiest answer to justify gender inequality in the workplace.

The interviews with the women also illustrate that the meanings of gender equality are constructed and interpreted differently, even though there have been similar

understandings about the difference between women and men among this groups of informants. Complex and sometimes contradictory interpretations and attitudes towards gender equality can be found. That's why one should not deny the centrality of women's experiences and how the meanings of gender equality in the workplace are constructed and negotiated.

My argument is not to discount the significance of sex-based biological differences or to suggest that women and men are the same in every way. Yet, it by no means follows that the extent of current gender inequality in the workplace is biologically determined. Ironically enough, the discourse of biological predispositions of women and men is only an excuse or a myth to mask the importance of other explanations. Therefore, we need to capture how the concepts and meanings of gender equality are constructed and negotiated.

In this chapter, I have already presented and analyzed the findings of the first group of the informants. Their understandings, perceptions and attitudes of the male-female difference, of gender equality in the workplace have been discussed in detail. In the following session, I will try to discuss the findings of the second group of the informants.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Women and Men: Same ?**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will present and analyze the findings of the second group of informants. In general, the informants in this group believe that women and men are the same. To all of them, there is not much difference between women and men. Most of them also think that since each individual is different and unique, it is meaningless to emphasize womens' differences.

Based on their beliefs in male-female sameness, the informants develop their own ways of understanding of the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. In general, most informants in this group agree with the notion that gender equality means the same treatment of members of the two sexes. They also point out equal opportunity is the best way to achieve gender equality in the workplace. In other words, equal opportunity is considered as a method or a means to achieve gender equality.

I will divide the following discussion into three main parts. The first part is about the respondents' understandings and conceptions of male-female sameness. The second part is about the informants' understandings and perceptions of and attitudes towards the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. Finally, in the last part of the discussion, the working experiences of my informants that are

related to gender inequality in the workplace will be discussed. It is hoped that through the sharing of working experiences, we can better understand how gender equality and equal opportunity are being constructed and negotiated in the workplace.

There are four cases included in this group and they are Ah Shan, Mei Yee, Ah Hing and Hoi Lam. These four respondents are coming from different backgrounds even though many of their understandings are quite similar in some way or another.

## **6.2 Women and Men are the Same ?**

In this section, I will present the views of my informants towards male-female difference. Generally speaking, all informants in this group believe that women and men are the same.

Ah Shan, who was 28, was a human resources department manager of a local hotel. She was single and had a very close boyfriend. At this stage, she did not want to get married because she wanted to concentrate on her job. Ah Shan thought that women and men did not have many differences. She said,

“I cannot see why women are different from men. What men can do, women can do, too. You can find women in different positions nowadays and many of them are doing very well, even better than their male counterparts... If you say women are different to men, I will ask you what exactly are the differences and what you want to tell me. Are you going to tell me women are not as capable as men or are you going to tell me woman is a weaker sex ? I think it is meaningless to stress male-female difference. Everyone is unique and different. In this world, some people are male and others are female; some are white, some are black and some are yellow; some are Christians, some are Muslim and some are Buddhist; some are able and some are disabled. So, there is no reason to stress that you are male or female.”

From the above quotation, it is obvious that Ah Shan thinks that women and men are the same. She also believes that the categories of “sex” or “gender” are just like race or religion and are meaningless categories because every person is different.

Another informant, Mei Yee, also shared very similar views to those of Ah Shan. She also believed women and men are both human beings and do not have much differences between them. In her own words,

“I cannot say that women and men are totally the same. At least, until nowadays, men cannot have babies. But, other than that, women and men are both human beings and share a lot of similarities... Some people like to emphasize very small difference between women and men and then exaggerate their difference. In most cases, they will lead to a conclusion that men are all like this and women are all like that and so men should be this and women should be that. I hate this kind of argument. How can you say that A and B are different because they have one small difference but have thousands of similarities? Thus, my answer to your question is women and men are almost the same despite the very little differences they do have.”

The understanding given by Mei Yee is interesting. She makes herself clear that women and men may have some minor differences, but, to a large extent, they are the same in most ways. Instead of focusing on the differences between the two sexes, she concludes that women and men are the same.

Just like Ah Shan, Mei Yee also agrees that sex or gender is an insignificant classification of human beings. Mei Yee was in her mid-thirties at the time of the interview. She was married but did not have children. She was a shipping clerk. In discussing the male-female difference, she pointed out,

“I’ve seen and met so many people. Some of them are men and some of them are women. I find that each of them has his own characteristics and

personality. Instead of saying that women and men are different, I would prefer to believe that each individual is unique and different.”

Thus, it is quite clear that Mei Yee deeply believes that women and men are the same. She also points out that sex and gender are unimportant and meaningless categories in classifying people.

The opinion of Ah Hing is also very similar to those of Ah Shan and Mei Yee. Ah Hing, aged 50, was a school amah. She was married with three children and all of them had grown up. Ah Hing believed that there was not much difference between women and men. In her own words,

“I think women and men are the same. I have three children, a daughter and two sons. My daughter is very sportive and likes all kinds of sport. She is also outgoing and active. However, my sons are quiet and introvert. Both of them are very thin. Besides, I also find my daughter stronger than my two sons. It may be because she likes to do a lot of sports. My observation is also true outside my family. Not all women are that weak, passive and emotional as is thought by the general public. Thus, the popular belief about women and men is only a myth. I don’t think there is a real difference between all women and all men.”

Ah Hing’s conversation tells us that the two sexes are the same. She also points out that the difference between women and men is sometimes exaggerated. From her observations and experiences, the stereotypes of the characteristics of the two sexes are misleading.

Finally, the opinion of Hoi Lam is very similar to those of the above informants. Hoi Lam was 37 years old and was single. She had worked as a kindergarten teacher for more than ten years. Because she had come across a lot of children within these years, she had an impression that the two sexes were actually the same. She said,

“In the past, I thought that women and men were different. However, I have changed my mind. I saw thousands of children as a kindergarten teacher, I found that the so-called boy’s characteristics or girl’s characteristics are not so strong. Each of them is different. In fact, even their faces are very similar when they are small and it is difficult to tell a child is a boy or a girl. Sometimes, I have to find it out from their school uniform... To a large extent, I think that the differences between women and men are due to the socialization process through which they are socialized into acceptable manners and behaviours. On the whole, I tend to believe that women and men are the same, at least they are born to be the same.”

The account Hoi Lam provided in the interviews not only confirmed her standpoint on male-female sameness, but also reflected her awareness of the notion of gendered characteristics. From her observation, many gendered characteristics are in fact social products rather than innate. To Hoi Lam, boys were encouraged to behave in a masculine way while girls were encouraged to behave in a feminine way when they were small. In her own words,

“Even in kindergarten, boys and girls are encouraged to behave according to their own sex. Boys are encouraged to be more active, assertive and outgoing while girls are encouraged to be more gentle and friendly... They are also given different kinds of toys... I think the educational system is still sexist.”

It is apparent that the account of Hoi Lam is similar to the assumptions of liberal feminism. Her arguments share a lot of similarities with that of liberal feminism. The importance of the socialization process in shaping the two sexes into masculine and feminine, which has been emphasised by Hoi Lam, is one of the most important contributions of liberal feminism. In fact, different discourses of liberal feminism in discussing gender inequality can be easily found in the accounts of this group of respondents.



From the above opinions, it is obvious that the informants in this group believe that women and men are indeed the same, even though they stress different foci. Some of them even think that sex and gender are insignificant and meaningless categories.

### **6.3 Conceptions on Gender Equality and Equal Opportunity**

In this section, I will discuss how my interviewees think about what gender equality and equal opportunity are and what these two concepts mean to them. In general, the views given by the interviewees are quite similar. All of them point out that gender equality means treating everybody in the same way and equal opportunity is the best way to guarantee everybody is enjoying the same chances and the same rights. Thus, the ultimate goal of equal opportunity is to achieve gender equality. In the following, the understandings, perceptions as well as attitudes of my interviewees will be further discussed.

First of all, I look at the perceptions and attitudes of Ah Shan. Ah Shan was very sure what the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace should be. She said,

“I know that people have very different interpretations on what gender equality is. But, to me, it is quite clear that equality means treating everybody in the same way, and gender equality, therefore, means treating women and men in the same way... I think that each person has his own background and need, and it is impossible to look after each of them. Therefore, it is the fairest way to treat everybody the same. Based on my above understanding, I would say that equal opportunity is the best way to achieve gender equality in the workplace. Equal opportunity means that everybody, regardless of their sex, should enjoy the same chance to be employed and to be promoted and should enjoy the same benefit. In other words, one's sex or gender should not be a barrier or an advantage in the workplace.”

From the above quotation, it is very clear that Ah Shan has developed a very concrete idea on what the two concepts, gender equality and equal opportunity, are in the workplace. To her, gender equality has to do with giving the same treatment to the two sexes and equal opportunity is the practice of the same treatment.

Ah Shan also pointed out that to promote gender equality and equal opportunity in her workplace was one of her job duties as a human resource manager and that was why she had to be sensitive to these issues. In fact, Ah Shan had tried to equip herself with at least some basic knowledge on gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace through different channels in the past few years. She claimed that after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance few years ago, she and some of her colleagues in her department had to make an extra effort to understand the law and what they should do in recruitment, task assignment and promotion to make sure they did not do anything unlawful. She pointed out,

“In recent years, we have been especially aware of the issue of equal opportunity after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance. Now, no matter whether it is recruitment, task assignment, placement, evaluation or promotion, women and men should be treated in the same way... Our boss said that we should be alert about the new law. He said it was not just an internal problem, it was also something to do with the image of our hotel... If our customers, especially female customers from Western countries, find out that we are not doing so well in promoting equal opportunity between the male and female staff, they may choose not to visit our hotel next time. So, the whole department took the issue very serious at that moment and a lot of talks and training programmes were launched to equip our staff with basic knowledge. At present, I dare to say that the equal opportunity between the two sexes is guaranteed.”

Ah Shan pointed out that her understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace was quite similar to that being advocated by the new law

and by the Equal Opportunities Commission. She strongly agreed with the direction and the mission of the EOC. It is hard to tell to what extent she is affected by the EOC, but, Ah Shan admitted that, at least to a certain extent, her understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity were affected and shaped by the EOC and the Sex Discrimination Ordinance.

Moreover, she also pointed out that equal opportunity and same treatment are very important in our society because they guarantee that the right person is in the right place. So, if you are smart and work very hard, you should get on, no matter what your sex is.

There is no doubt that the awareness about the issue of equal opportunity for the two sexes has increased and that different kinds of practices are introduced to guarantee equal opportunity between women and men in the workplace after the passage of the SDO, based on what we have learned from Ah Shan. However, it is sad to know that, instead of upholding social justice between the two sexes, keeping the image of the hotel seems to be more important. In other words, preserving an image of good equal opportunity practice can be beneficial to the image of the hotel as a whole. Under these circumstances, the practice of equal opportunity measures is difficult to be effective as the ultimate goal is not to uphold social justice. It helps to explain why these measures stand accused by some feminists of having failed to deliver the radical change necessary to improve the position of women in the workplace.

Now, we move Mei Yee; Like Ah Shan, Mei Yee also believes that gender equality means the same treatment for the two sexes while equal opportunity is the best way to guarantee gender equality in the workplace. She said,

“I think gender equality in the workplace is too abstract to understand. To me, if there is equal opportunity and everyone is treated equally and the same, that is already enough. And I think this is a more concrete way to speak of gender equality in the workplace.”

Mei Yee illustrated very clearly how she thought about the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace and the relationship between the two concepts. To her, the concept of equal opportunity was more concrete and easier to understand. She also made her point very clear by that the promotion of equal opportunity was the best way to achieve gender equality in the workplace.

Mei Yee also expressed her opinion on achieving gender equality in real practice in the workplace. She said,

“To me, equality in the workplace means treating everybody exactly the same. It means that if a woman and a man are in the same job, they should receive the same salary, benefit and have the same opportunity to obtain a promotion. Qualified person, whether a man or a woman, should get the job. Therefore, your sex is never a barrier in your career development. If you show you’re keen, it doesn’t matter who you are and what your sex is.”

Another informant, Ah Hing developed a very similar view to Ah Shan and Mei Yee. Ah Hing described herself as a “foolish middle aged woman” and that she knew nothing. She grew up in a small village in Mainland China and married a man from Hong Kong. Later, she gave birth to three children. In 1988, she was allowed to stay in Hong Kong to reunite with her family. Because of her background, she was not confident in her understanding towards gender equality and equal opportunity. She said,

“I’m not so confident to say what gender equality and equal opportunity are. I guess equality means treating everybody fairly. But, the question is what is fairness. To me, if everybody can be treated in the same way

in the workplace and can have the same chance to be employed and to be promoted, that means there is equality.”

Ah Hing also described her working experiences as a school amah in Hong Kong as very different from her past experience on the Mainland where she worked as a factory worker. She said,

“When I was working in a factory on the Mainland, no one talked about gender equality in the workplace. Because the two sexes are thought to be different, they should be treated different by. Sometimes, I heard about people fighting for the right of workers but that did not particularly refer to women workers... On the Mainland, it is normal to pay more to men workers. Unequal pay to men and women workers is a very common practice. But, in Hong Kong, there seems to be some kind of legislation to protect women. I don’t know what exactly it is, but it seems that women in Hong Kong are much luckier than women in the Mainland.”

Ah Hing further explained that her views about gender equality in the workplace were largely “learnt” in Hong Kong.

“Now, I think that women should enjoy equal opportunity and equal pay with men and this is what I know about gender equality in the workplace. If women and men are in the same post, they should be treated the same. Let’s take my job as an example. As a school amah, I’m doing the same jobs and tasks as compared with other male school amahs. We are receiving the same wages and the same benefit. I think this is gender equality and fairness. In fact, these are what I have learnt here... I’m glad that we have the anti-discrimination legislation in Hong Kong and that people are open enough to talk and to accept these ideas of gender equality. In Mainland China, it seems to be impossible. Women in China will not ask for gender equality because they are used to it. They are used to be submissive, obedient and dependent. They are also used to be subordinated.”

The above quotations give us some important insights in capturing people’s conceptions on gender equality. First, it is obvious that the concept of gender equality is

culturally and ethnically specific. The meanings of gender equality vary from culture to culture. The experiences of Ah Hing demonstrate that there have been variations in how the concept of gender equality is understood and constructed in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Second, Ah Hing also pointed out that gender equality was a modern concept and people had to be very “open” to accept the idea of gender equality. Since the people in Hong Kong are thought to be more open, they can accept the idea of gender equality.

Finally, Hoi Lam; she also has similar opinions towards gender equality and equal opportunity. She said,

“Actually, gender equality is something to do with equal opportunity. Equal opportunity means to promote and guarantee the same chance and the same opportunity to the two sexes to access different resources... I think it is the best way to develop one’s fullest potential and talent.”

The opinion of Hoi Lam illustrated that she believed gender equality was similar to equal opportunity and, offering the same treatment. She also pointed out that equal opportunity has the important function of providing chances for developing people’s potential and ability.

In general, the four informants in this group share very similar opinions about gender equality and equal opportunity. They all think that gender equality means treating the two sexes in the same way and promoting equal opportunity between the two sexes is the best way to achieve gender equality. They also point out that the concept of gender equality is too abstract to understand, but, on the other hand, the concept of equal opportunity is more concrete to understand and to apply in daily life.

It is undeniable that the accounts of this group of informants share a lot of similarities with the notions of liberal feminism. Like most liberal feminists, the informants have developed a positive attitude about the importance of the same treatment between the sexes. They argue that if there is no discrimination, no barrier and no obstacle in the workplace, if women can be treated exactly in the same way as men, women can do most of the things men can, and only by doing these can the two sexes be equal.

From what the women said, the single most common view today is probably one that tries to combine equal opportunity, gender equality and same treatment. In this way, differences between women and men are considered to be not existing or unimportant.

#### **6.4 The Construction of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunity in the Workplace**

In this section, I would like to present the working experiences of my informants. As in the previous chapter, it was hoped that through the sharing of working experiences, the informants can better organize and reflect their ways of thinking about the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. I also hoped that we could try to find out some important clues and insights on how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are constructed and negotiated in the workplace. It was also hoped that the accounts of the informants can help to illustrate how the discourse of “sameness between women and men” is being used and even manipulated in the construction of gender equality in the workplace.

First of all, I will present the working experiences of Ah Shan. As mentioned in the previous section, gender equality meant the same treatment and equal opportunity

was one of the most important elements in same treatment according to Ah Shan. She also pointed out her working experiences confirmed this notion of gender equality and equal opportunity as well as the relationship between them.

Ah Shan started working as a management trainee after finishing her Higher Diploma course in Hotel Management seven years ago. She was then admitted to a part-time Bachelor Degree course also in Hotel Management so that she could continue to work at the same time. Because of her outstanding performance, she was, first of all, promoted to the post of assistant human resources department manager four years ago and, in the last year, she was further promoted to be the human resources department manager. She said that it was not easy to be promoted to be a manager at her age and she attributed her success to hard work and equal opportunity in our society. She said,

“My experience tells me two important things. First, it tells me that equal opportunity is important. Second, and I think more importantly, it tells me that you have to work hard in order to get what you want.”

Ah Shan stressed many times that equal opportunity and same treatment were very important in our society as they guaranteed the right person to be in the right place. However, she argued that she came across some situations where women required special arrangement or treatment only because of their sex and she thought it was unfair and unequal to men. In her own words,

“For example, if a job requires a technician to go down and to clean up the pipe, it is definitely a dangerous task, very often, female technician will refuse to do the job just because they are women. I don’t think it is fair. Another example is the case of the housekeeper in my hotel. I cannot understand why female workers are not required to work the night shift. I know that some male colleagues complain it is unfair to them.”



Ah Shan was very angry with these different treatments favoring women. She was proud of herself not taking any advantage with her sex and she believed women could and should take up most of the tasks that were thought to be only for men. She further commented that if some women required special treatment and privilege, it was no good to women as a group. She said,

“If women enjoy some kind of privilege, people will have an impression that women are not as competent as men... The consequence will be that employers will prefer hiring men to women and people will believe that men are the more powerful sex. I don’t want this to happen. So, I had worked doubly hard to prove myself throughout my career life. I want to tell everybody that woman is not a weaker sex. In fact, rigid and demanding career schedules are often the story of most of the career women and that’s why many of them have to sacrifice their family lives. I think it is nothing to do with gender equality. If you had chosen to develop your career, you had to give up some other things. Instead, we can compete with men in every aspect in the workplace... I understand very well that some women, especially married women with children, may need to take care of their children. But, everyone, men or women, has his own needs and problems. It is not a convincing excuse to ask for special treatment.”

The above quotation illustrates that Ah Shan’s understandings and perceptions are predicated on liberal notions of gender equality and equal opportunity. On the whole, Ah Shan believes that gender equality in the workplace means equal opportunity in all aspects of employment and the same treatment between women and men. Even though career women have to work doubly hard to prove themselves, provided that there is equal opportunity between the two sexes, the situation can still be considered as “no problem”. It’s just your “personal choice” and has nothing to do with gender equality. She also does not agree that women should get some kind of special treatment and privilege because she believes that each person has its own problems and difficulties.

From the above, it is clearly illustrated how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are constructed and negotiated. They are constructed and negotiated in a subtle and insidious ways under the influence of different discourses. We can see that “fairness” and “equality” are constructed as the same treatment to everybody regardless of his/her sex and gender, even though one sex has to pay more to achieve this so-called fairness and equality. Equal opportunity, on the other hand, is being constructed as the best measure and practice to guarantee gender equality in the workplace.

Another interviewee, Mei Yee, developed a very similar opinion. The number of male shipping clerks was similar to that of female clerks and there was no distinct sexual division of labour in her company. They were doing exactly the same jobs and receiving the same salary. Thus, she described her workplace as quite equal and no discrimination could be found.

Mei Yee also saw relations between women and men in her company as equal. She pointed out,

“So far, we (women) have as many chances as men have in my company. We are doing the same job. No one sex can get some kind of special advantage and no one sex will be discriminated... Half of my seniors are men and half of them are women. I think if I’m smart enough and I work harder, I can also be promoted in the future.”

The above quotations from Mei Yee tell us that according to her gender equality in the workplace means the same treatment of women and men. There should be no privilege and no discrimination on the basis of sex. In other words, sex should be treated as an irrelevant category in the workplace. Although Mei Yee did not experience

any discrimination and unequal treatment in her workplace, she was not satisfied with the present situation. She explained,

“I think that we are being treated like we are men... If I believe in gender equality, I should accept that women and men should take up the same job. But, there are situations in which I’m uncomfortable. At the bottom of my heart, I hope that we can allow not to do some jobs such as those strenuous jobs... In principle, women and men should be dealt with in the same way. But, the picture is sometimes different in reality.”

The view espoused by Mei Yee is significant. It illustrates that Mei Yee has faced confusion and contradiction in treating gender equality as same ‘treatment’ between women and men as well as the notion of sameness between the two sexes. Sometimes, she will ask herself whether women and men are really the same or not. Her attitude towards same treatment is also negative, even though she believes that it is the way to achieve gender equality. Sometimes, she has hard feelings about being treated like a man. It is, therefore, obvious that the standard and norm of male, instead of those of female, are usually taken for granted. Women should follow the male model when talking about gender equality as same treatment between the two sexes in the workplace.

Once again, we can see that it is problematic if the meaning of gender equality is constructed as same treatment to everyone. To a certain extent, it denies the needs and concerns of women. Besides, the notion of treating everybody in the same way can be easily constructed as treating everybody in a “male way.”

Ah Hing also has similar experiences in the workplace. She pointed out that, as a female school amah, she was required to take up those strenuous jobs including

cleaning window of the school hall and moving furniture such as desks and chairs. She said,

“Because we are receiving the same salary and benefit, we have to do the same jobs, including those strenuous jobs... Sometimes, female school amahs complain about this arrangement. However, our voices have seldom been heard. I heard a male school amah saying that we are without any sense. He said: “it is you women instead of men who ask for equality with men, so you have to do these strenuous tasks. If you are unable to do so, why don’t you just quit the job...” But on the contrary, sometimes, we have to take up extra work and clean up the classrooms and toilets because our supervisor thinks that women are better in cleaning jobs. He explains this is a usual practice in most schools and it is in the interest of the students. He concludes that it is nothing to do with gender equality... Everyone hates cleaning toilets, but we have to do it. Honestly speaking, I think it is unfair.”

From the above example, different and sometimes contradictory discourses around gender equality are being used to place women in a disadvantaged position in the workplace. On the one hand, the meaning of gender equality is constructed as “same treatment” so that female school amahs are required to do all the jobs. This same treatment of women and men is often the continued predominance of masculine traits and values, with the consequence that women become like men.

On the other hand, the meaning of gender equality is constructed under the influence of other discourses, such as the “normal and usual practice”, “for the benefit of the whole”, “women are good at doing these” and so on. In the case of Ah Hing,

gender equality can be sacrificed to other values when necessary. In both situations, female school amahs are placed in a disadvantaged position.

In addition, when women and men are treated in the same way, a different backlash will be the result and the denigration of women's capabilities and abilities is one the most common forms of backlash.

When Ah Hing was asked how to handle this unfair situation, she replied,

"Most of us are reluctant to take any action even though we have the right to do so. In our Chinese culture, there are certain ways of acting which are thought to be unacceptable or not so good. Creating conflicts and disputes are typical examples... I don't want to be labeled as a troublemaker. It is stressful... Being excluded is a serious punishment and I don't want to be excluded... So, the best way is to keep really silent."

Thus, there is a powerful stereotype of these women as "troublesome", which acts to silence them when they want to voice their unfair treatment. This explains why although Ah Hing realizes she might have to do something about it, she does not have the emotional energy to do so. It shows that women are sometimes aware of the exploitation, but in most circumstances, they "manage" it by themselves.

Finally, let us examine Hoi Lam's story. She pointed out that she did not have any male colleague in her workplace, so it was difficult to talk about the relationship between the two sexes in her workplace. It was also impossible to comment on whether the two sexes were equal or not in her workplace. She pointed out,

"As you may know, kindergarten teacher is thought to be an occupation for women. When I entered this occupation more than ten years ago, I

dare to say that almost 100% of kindergarten teachers were female. Now, there may be a little bit improvement, but I think that still more than 99% are female... People generally believe that women are more patient and soft. These dispositions make them more suitable to be teachers.”

Although there is no sexual division of labour in Hoi Lam’s workplace as all the teachers are female, there is a clear gender segregation of work in the field of education. Hoi Lam pointed out an important issue. If patience, calmness, caring are important quality of a teacher, it cannot explain why men outnumber women in higher education.

Hoi Lam remarked,

“I think that women are generally softer and are more patient than men. But, it’s something to do with the nature of the way kids are brought up. If boys are nurtured to be more patient and soft, they can also possess these qualities.”

The opinions of Hoi Lam are consistent. She insisted that the two sexes were born to be the same. They grew up to be different because of the ways they were nurtured.

As a conclusion, the ways in which my respondents give an account on themselves provide an illuminating view of the construction and negotiation of gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. It is obvious that most of the notions of the informants are quite similar to the assumptions of liberal feminism.

In general, the understandings and perceptions of this group of informants are less varied compared with the first group of informants. All of them believe that gender equality should be viewed as same treatment between the two sexes, in spite of the feather they have developed different attitudes towards “same treatment”. Both positive

and negative attitudes can be found. Those who have developed a positive attitude towards “same treatment” between the two sexes insist that it is the only way to prove women’s ability and capability. If women are treated differently, an impression that women are weaker will result. Thus, even though women have to make an extra effort or have to make a sacrifice, it is still worthy to do so.

However, the ideas of sameness between women and men and same treatment between the two sexes can make invisible specific female needs and concerns. In most cases, the male standard and norm are taken for granted. Women have to follow these standards and norms.

Moreover, the respondents also try to combine the concept of gender equality and the concept of equal opportunity. It gives us an impression that the two concepts are interchangeable. The notion of “gender equality = equal opportunity = same treatment” is therefore common among this group of informants.

In this chapter, I have discussed the understandings and opinions of those respondents who thought that males and females were or should be the same. I have also examined their understanding and perceptions of and attitudes about gender equality and equal opportunity. Finally, I have also illustrated how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are constructed and negotiated within different discourses through sharing the working experiences of my informants. In the following chapter, I will turn to the last group of the informants who think that women and men are at the same time different as well as the same.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Same or Different?**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

In the previous two chapters, I have pointed out how the concepts of “sameness” and “difference” shaped women’s understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity. I have also tried to point out the processes of construction of these concepts that is how their understandings of gender equality and equal opportunity are developed. We can see that “sameness” and “difference” constitute an oppositions, and, therefore, represent alternative understandings and strategies to deal with women’s working life. The division between “sameness” and “difference” imposes an impossible choice; if one opts for “sameness”, one is forced to accept the notion that any appearance of “difference” is antithetical to it. On the contrary, if one opts for “difference”, one admits that “sameness” are antithetical to it. As a result, women who engaged in this dispute are constrained to think and argue in terms of “sameness” or “difference” and they have no other choice. This is why demanding equality has proven to be so problematic for women.

It is true that some of my interviewees are also facing similar problems when they try to think more about what gender equality exactly is. I found that, when some of my interviewees talked about their working experiences, their perceptions of and attitudes of gender equality and equal opportunity, they are come up with feelings towards ambivalence. Contradictions and inconsistency were also common features.



Bacchi argues that a sameness/difference framework is in itself problematic. She points out that this framework will only result in unnecessary tensions, where women have to identify themselves either like men or as different from men. That is why Bacchi further argues that “a sameness/difference framework places unacceptable boundaries on the possibilities for change (Bacchi, 1990, Introduction).” She also suggests that a new way of thinking should replace this sameness/difference approach.

In a similar vein, Scott also rejects the idea that equality versus difference constitutes an opposition. Thus, the only alternative to her is to refuse to oppose equality to difference.

From the experiences of my interviewees, it is also true that some of them do not belong to these two camps. They cannot be classified as belonging to the “sameness” group or to the “difference” group. Basically, they think that women are at the same time, different from and the same as men in some or other ways. It is ironic that some of my interviewees begin to question the fixed binary oppositions of sameness versus difference or equality versus difference.

In this chapter, their experiences and with, perceptions of and attitudes towards gender equality and equal opportunity will be discussed. I will divide my discussion into three parts; the first part deals with how my informants think about the male/female difference debate. The second part is about their understandings and, perceptions of and attitudes towards gender equality and equal opportunity. In the third part of this section, I will show and discuss my informants’ working experiences that are related to gender equality in the workplace. The construction process as to how their conceptions and

attitudes towards gender equality and equal opportunity are being constructed will be discussed.

Three informants are put into this group and they are Ka Man, Lei Fung and Ah Fong. The backgrounds of these three informants are varied in terms of their age, marital status, place of origin, occupation and so on. One of the informants is an active member of a local women's group.

## **7.2 Women and Men, Same or Different ?**

In the last two chapters, I have shown that the two groups of informants either identify with the "sameness" camp or the "difference" camp. One group of interviewees believes that women and the men are the same. Another group of interviewees points out that women and men are different. The sameness/difference debate suggests that women ought to seek equality with men or to admit their difference. As a result, women are encouraged, either, to become as competitive as men in the workplace, or, to remain passive, dependent and on the side-lines.

The last group of interviewees do not identify themselves with the "sameness" camps or the "difference" camp. Generally speaking, this group of respondents thinks that women are indeed at the same time the same as and different from men. They begin to ask why "equality" and "difference" are in opposition and they think that the argument on sameness/difference is only a myth and an excuse to justify gender inequality and to maintain the status quo. In the following sections, I will introduce the cases of Ka Man, Lei Fung and Ah Fong to explore how they think about the difference between women and men.

Ka Man, who was 32, is a medical social worker working in a public hospital during the time of the interview. She was mainly responsible for casework and counseling. Her job required her to deal with a lot of people with very different backgrounds and it made her reflect about a lot of issues and problems, including the issues about women and men. When she was asked to comment on women and men, whether they were the same or different, she gave the following answer,

“I have come across a lot of people in my work life, women and men, old and young, rich and poor, and so on. I cannot say that all groups are the same... Many people say that by nature women are softer, weaker, less assertive and less calm while men are stronger, more rational and decisive. But, I have come across many women, patients or relatives, who are so rational, firm and assertive that you cannot imagine. So, it is meaningless to say that women are the same as or are different from men. Why it is not possible that women are at the same time the same as and are different from men.”

Ka Man asked the interviewer to give her a short break for her to organize her thinking on this issue so that she could better demonstrate her comments and opinions. She pointed out that she had some ideas on this issue, but they were unorganized; so many things come into her mind. After several minutes, she continued,

“People are strange. Sometimes, they treat you just like men and say that women are no different from men. Sometimes, they think you are a woman and should receive different treatment and shouldn’t be treated as a man. Therefore, I believe that the problem is not whether women are different from men or not. The real problem is how we interpret these so-called ‘differences’ and what implications flow from them.”

Another informant, Lei Fung, shared similar views with Ka Man. Lei Fung was born in Mainland China in the early 60s and she was 40 years old at the time of the interview. She described herself as “very clever and very smart.” In fact, she was always the number one in school and at university. When she had finished her high

school education in the Mainland, she went to the United States to continue her studies with a scholarship. She got her first Degree in Science and then got a second degree in Medicine. Later, she found a job as a researcher in Tokyo and had worked there for several years. In 1994, after getting married to a Chinese business man, she came to Hong Kong. She was working as a medical officer in a public hospital at the time of the interview. Lei Fung said that, because of her background and unique experiences, she had a special empathy towards women and said that she espoused some kind of feminist thinking, even though she had never learnt any feminist theory in class. She also said that she had profound and more specific feelings that she did not know how to articulate when talking about gender equality.

When Lei Fung was asked to give her opinions on the difference between women and men, she offered the following comments,

“As a doctor, I think that women and men are different in some ways. No one can deny that until now men hardly ever get pregnant. But, women and men in many ways are the same... However, the difference between women and men are either highly exaggerated or are highly neglected. Sometimes you will hear people say that ‘because you are a woman, you should not do this and that.’ Sometimes you hear that ‘men and women are the same, so you have to do this.’ It is obviously double standard. What people want to tell you is not whether you, as a woman, are the same as or are different from men; what they want to tell is ‘stay back, woman. It is men’s territory.’ I’m really sick of it.”

From the above conversations, Ka Man and Lei Fung clearly expressed their ways of thinking. They both think that women are at the same time the same as and different from men. To them, the most important issue is not whether women are indeed the same as or different from men, but how people make use of these arguments to maintain the status quo of a male-dominated society.

Ah Fong, another informant, also questioned the argument that women were either the same as or different from men. But, unlike Ka Man and Lei Fung, she was not sure how to provide a concrete answer to this problem.

Ah Fong was in her early 50s. When she was small, she liked drawing and painting very much. After she had finished her primary school education, she worked in a comics company and it was her first job. Despite having great interest in her job, she left it shortly after, due to a number of reasons that will be further discussed in the next section. Later, she became a sewing machinist in a factory and had worked there for almost ten years until she got married. She left the labour market to take care of her three children and became a full-time housewife. When all her children were grown up in the early 90s, she re-entered the labour market. But, because of economic restructuring and the decline of the manufacturing industries, she could not go back to her former post. After searching for some months, she finally took up a job as a health care assistant in a centre for the elderly a job in, which Ah Fong did not have much interest.

Ah Fong was still working in the centre for the elderly at the time of the interview. She pointed out that even though her work was very routine and boring and did not offer any promotion opportunity, she would continue there, because she did not have any other choice. She even thought that she was quite lucky to have a job at her age. Ah Fong also pointed out that she joined one of the local women's groups many years ago. She was one of the core members of the group and was active in fighting for the rights of woman workers. She clarified that, by joining the women's group, she had gained some insight into gender equality in the workplace. She also started to question

some of the so-called very “ordinary” and “normal” practices in the workplace, such as the gender division of labour.

When she was asked to give comment on whether women were the same as or different from men, she had the following response,

“I don’t know whether women and men are the same or are different. Some people say that women and men are the same. But, some say they are different. So, I am confused. Anyway, I think it is not a very important problem since everyone has a different opinion and sometimes different arguments to support them... At some moments, I believe that women and men are the same. However, at other moments, I think that women and men are different. Now, I tend to believe that it is not the main question we should ask. It doesn’t matter whether women and men are the same or not. It does matter how they are treated with what explanations or excuses.”

Instead of saying that women and men were the same or were different, Ah Fong did not view it as an important question. According to Ah Fong, she had gone through different stages in understanding the problem and she came up with a conclusion that it was not important whether women and men were different or not.

From her experience in the women’s group and in fighting for the right of women workers, Ah Fong commented that, over the years, there had been some stages of development and different tendencies over the issue whether women and men were the same or were different. In some periods, women and men were thought to be the same and, therefore, there were voices claiming the same treatment for women and men. But, at other times, women’s difference was stressed and there were voices for special treatment for women. Ah Fong pointed out that there were problems within both

positions. Both positions can lead to improvements of the condition of women, but can create other problems for women. That was why she refused to identify herself with either also the “sameness” or the “difference” side.

We can notice that the understandings of Ka Man, Lei Fung and Ah Fong of the issue of whether women and men are the same or whether they are different are very different from the previous two groups of interviewees. Although there are slight differences in their ways of thinking, they tend to refuse the notion that women and men are either the same or different. Ka Man and Lei Fung believe that women and men are at the same time the same and different, while Ah Fong considers the issue not important, but at least, she still refuses to identify herself in either side.

### **7.3 Conceptions of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunity in the Workplace**

In this part, I will discuss how my interviewees think about what gender equality and equal opportunity are and what these two concepts mean to them. Generally speaking, the interviewees question the common beliefs about gender equality and equal opportunity. They all point out that most people like to equate equality and equal opportunity (equality = equal opportunity) and that this is a common belief about these issues. All of them say that equality and equal opportunity are different.

When talking about gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace, Ka Man clearly pointed out that gender equality was not equal to the same treatment as proposed by the Equal Opportunities Commission. Also, equal opportunity did not necessarily result in gender equality. She said,

“To me, gender equality is not equal to the same treatment is that proposed by the newly established Equal Opportunities Commission. I think what the EOC has advocated is too artificial. By artificial, I mean pushing women to work harder and harder and to learn how to be men... It also seems that the quality of man instead of woman is cherished... Equal opportunity is one way to achieve equality but it is definitely not enough.”

When she was asked to clarify what she meant by gender equality, she replied,

“This question is very difficult to answer. The term ‘gender equality’ is quite abstract in itself. I don’t know whether I can make my point very clear or not. I will try my best. By gender equality, I mean a kind of equality that takes into account people’s difference and their specific needs. I admit that equal opportunity is one of the very important elements but it is not directly equal to equality... I hope that this kind of equality can respect everybody and can provide enough space for discussion... In fact, what we need is a broader understanding of equality so that different people’s particular situations can be acknowledged instead of putting too much emphasis on equal opportunity.”

It is obvious that Ka Man’s perception of gender equality and her ways of thinking are quite similar to ideas suggested by some poststructuralist feminists, such as Bacchi and Scott who I had mentioned before. Ka Man made her argument clearly. She believed that equality was not in opposition to difference. On the contrary, she thought that gender equality should include and take into account difference, such as the special needs and concerns of women. Thus, for her, the concept of gender equality was not built on either sameness or difference. She even challenged the assumption that gender equality should preclude difference.

Lei Fung had very similar opinions to Ka Man’s. She also believed that equal opportunity is different from equality. She said,



“It’s never easy to talk about gender equality. When I heard of the term ‘equality’, there are so many things and memories coming back into my mind. A lot of unhappy experiences come back. I think because of my special background and experience, I have a different understanding on gender equality.”

Lei Fung continued,

“To me, ‘gender equality’ is a kind of attitude of mind. You believe that you should respect everybody and should treat everybody equally and fairly... Equality and equal opportunity is absolutely two things. Equal opportunity is equal opportunity and equality is equality. These two are not the same. You cannot say that because there is equal opportunity, there is equality. I think equal opportunity is only the prerequisite for having equality. We can see that, even though there may be equal opportunity policies elsewhere in the world, gender inequality is still prevailing in every aspect of our lives... I know that many people have very different conceptions about gender equality and equal opportunity. When I was in the States in the 80s, people generally believed that treating everybody the same means equal. However, treating women and men equally only means treating women as if they are men. The consequence is that there seems to be only one sex in the society. Of course, the only one sex is men. This common understanding of equality ignores people’s background, their family, their class, their race and so on. To me, this kind of equality is therefore meaningless and unreal.”

The above represents Lei Fung’s conceptions and understandings of gender equality and means treating women as they are men. The consequence is that there seems to be only one sex in the society. Of course, the only one sex is man. This common understanding of equality ignores people’s equal opportunity. It was obvious that she thought there was a gap between equality and equal opportunity and equal opportunity was only the prerequisite of having equality. Equal opportunity and equality were two things to her.

In addition to Ka Man and Lei Fung, Ah Fong had a similar understanding of gender equality and equal opportunity. In her own words,

“Actually, everyone has different interpretations of what is gender equality and equal opportunity. These two terms are very abstract and ambiguous. In the past, I thought that when there was equal opportunity for the two sexes, there was gender equality. It might be because, at that time, women had very limited opportunities in every aspect of life. However, after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance several years ago, I came to realize that the promotion of equal opportunity was not enough. I don’t feel the world is more equal for women. There must be something more in order to achieve equality between the two sexes. But, I don’t know what is missing.”

From the above conversations, Ah Fong tells us how she thinks about gender equality and equal opportunity. Although she could not give us a full picture of what gender equality meant to her, she pointed out that the promotion of equal opportunity was not enough. There should be something more in order to achieve gender equality.

It must be stressed that the three informants point out at the same time that the concepts of equal opportunity and gender equality are very abstract, unclear and without concrete definition. As pointed out by Goode and Bagihole (1998), ambiguity is easily manipulated and exploited. This ambiguity and the shifting ground upon which the discourses of gender equality and equal opportunity are formulated, serve to produce and reproduce gender inequality in the workplace and to keep women in the status quo.

Although there are exist different interpretations of the concepts of gender equality and equal opportunity between the three informants, they generally agree that equal opportunity is not the same as gender equality. However, all of them point out many times in the interviews that their ways of thinking are “different”, “uncommon”,

“special” and “unusual.” Ka Man attributed her different ways of thinking to her argumentative personality. Lei Fung attributed it to her special background and Ah Fong said it might be because of her involvement in the women’s group. No matter what their reasons are, they have a feeling that their ideas are quite “abnormal” and may not be easily accepted by other people.

#### **7.4 The Construction of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunity in the Workplace**

In this section, I would present the working experiences of my informants. The focus is on the unequal and unfair treatments that the informants have experienced in the workplace. It was hoped that, through the sharing of working experiences, the interviewees could better organize and reflect upon their thinking towards the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. And, it was hoped that we could find out some important clues how the process of construction and the process of engendering are taking place, that is, how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are being constructed and negotiated in the workplace.

Ka Man directly pointed out that there still exist sex discrimination and gender inequality in every aspect of the working life, including the recruitment process, the division of jobs and tasks as well as the consideration of promotion. In her own words,

“Even though the social work profession is usually described as a female profession, because most people believe that women are more suitable in taking up caring tasks, men instead of women are always favoured. I have heard of some arguments saying that it is necessary to keep a balance between the number of male and female staff in an organization. Too many female staff in the office is problematic. People think that women like to create a lot of trouble (是非). In fact, our supervisor always complains that there is no male staff (except him) in our department and we all know that if there is any vacancy in the future, he

will definitely employ a male social worker so as to change, in his word 'improve' the balance between the number of male and female staff. On the contrary, I don't think they will say the same thing when the number of male staff is greater than that of the female staff."

From the experience of Ka Man, it is interesting to find out that male, rather than female applicants, are preferred for female-type jobs, such as the social work profession. It is obvious that the expectations of the employer and supervisor are affecting how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are constructed. Some employers and supervisors, just like the supervisor of Ka Man, may think that too many female staff is no good. To him, it is "normal" and of course very "fair" to keep the number of male and female staff in a balance. According to Ka Man, this kind of discourse is very common in the social work profession. The preference of the employers and supervisors for male staff can indeed have serious consequences for how a female staff member perceives herself. It also has a significant effect on how the meanings of gender equality in the workplace are constructed.

In addition, according to Ka Man, gender inequality still existed in the recruitment process. Even though the request for a male social worker might not be found in the advertisement, the preference of the employers still existed. Ka Man attributed the gender inequality in the workplace to gender bias and she claimed traditional sex-role stereotypes were still prevailing.

"Traditional sex-role stereotypes are still prevailing. Most people, sometimes even I, will think that women are a 'trouble making sex' and will create a lot of unnecessary troubles and problems. On the contrary, men are considered to be easier to go along with. This is one of the main reasons why man is usually thought to be a more capable sex in the workplace because of men's personality and characteristics."

Apart from the recruitment process, Ka Man said that gender inequality also existed in other aspects of her work life.

“As a female social worker, I find that I have no chance to choose the jobs that I really want to take up. Everyone assumes that a female social worker can take up cases regardless of the background of the clients. So, I have to work with both male and female clients with all backgrounds, no matter whether they are a husband with a second wife in the Mainland, a man with a history of battering wife, a man with marital problems, and so on. However, male social workers usually can choose not to take up cases with women. In the past, there was one male social worker in my office and he could choose not to work with female clients. His explanation was ‘inconvenience’ and that it was for the welfare and the well being of the clients. However, when we, female social workers, request the same arrangement, in most cases, we are ignored. It seems we (female social workers) are ‘sexless’. To me, it is definitely a double standard and unfair to female social workers... There are a lot of these kinds of things which happen every day. I don’t know whether it is correct or not, but I think men usually have more power than women in the workplace.”

The working experience of Ka Man was not surprising; even though all of her colleagues in her rank were women, she still felt being discriminated against. She imagined the different treatment that a male social worker had. She felt that women were not favoured in many ways. Women’s concerns and needs were sometimes side tracked and were not being listened to. In the case of Ka Man, even though she and some of her female colleagues had pointed out several times that they did not want to deal with some kinds of cases, mainly with male clients, their requests were not considered seriously. There was a general belief that women were capable to take care of all people, no matter whether man or woman, old or young, or with whatever background. It is not the main focus here to further discuss why this kind of belief is so prevalent, but, this belief may be linked to and reflects the role of woman in the family.

As a result, the request of Ka Man and her colleagues was thought to be “unreasonable” and “abnormal” and quite “strange.” On the contrary, their supervisor’s view, that they (female social workers) did not have enough reason to refuse their male clients, sounded “fair” and “reasonable.” There was nothing wrong or unequal about requesting a female social worker to handle every case. The arrangement was just common and usual practice.

Very often, gender inequality in the workplace is so pervasive and invisible that it appears to be the natural order of things and that there is nothing wrong with it. Discrimination and gender inequality indeed happen in a subtle way. They may happen through the interpersonal relationship in our daily life, which not one of us can escape from.

Ka Man described herself working in a female profession but under the supervision of a male supervisor and she expressed her frustrations when she talked about her prospects for promotion. She explained,

“You know, there are altogether eight assistant social work officers in my department and all of them are women. But, our supervisor is a man. My colleagues and I really don’t know why he was promoted. The only possible answer we can think of is because he is a man. People usually think that men are more suitable to take up those administrative jobs. I do not have any statistics, but according to my impression, men tend to be faster movers than women. I can still remember when I was studying in the university, the ratio of male students to female students was about one to six or seven, but I dare to say that there are many more men at the administrative or management level.”

Male social workers, according to Ka Man, had a much easier time being promoted than women do. They were promoted to managerial positions more rapidly and frequently. She continued,

“I know it is impossible to have the same number of male and female senior staff, or in my profession, there should be more female senior staff than male female, may be six to one. I also understand that if even we achieve this, it does not mean we finally enjoy equality with men. You can hear the stories, of course stories of struggling, of high-flying women elsewhere. The stories of how hard they have to work in the male domain. I think it is not fair if a woman has to work doubly hard to get what she wants when compared to a man.”

Ka Man pointed out a very true and important issue here which I have discussed in previous sections. She pointed out that equality between women and men in the workplace can not only measured in numerical or in statistical terms. Numbers and statistics can give us some background information but can never tell us people’s experiences. Thus, maybe one day the number of male and female senior staff would be exactly the same in Ka Man’s workplace, but no one can guarantee that gender equality is achieved.

When Ka Man was asked how she handled this unfair situation, she had the following comments.

“Angry, angry and angry again when I first faced this situation (unfair situation). You don’t know what to do. However, when it happens again and again, I will get accustomed to it and my feelings are not that strong anymore. It becomes part of your life and seems to be impossible to avoid.”

Ka Man said that she tried to complain about the unfair treatment, but the response from her supervisor was terrible. He did not think it was an important problem.

According to Ka Man, his apathetic attitude made her feel uneasy. It seemed that Ka Man was “creating” unnecessary trouble and conflict. At that moment, she felt she was being isolated.

As these kinds of unfair situations happened again and again, Ka Man found herself getting accustomed to them. Although she might come across unfair treatments sometimes, she seldom complained about them again because it was “no use.” But, the most important thing that kept her silent was the responses by other people. Ka Man once said,

“I’m just an ordinary woman. I want to be accepted by others. I also want to keep a harmonious relationship with my supervisor and other colleagues. I really don’t want to be isolated and excluded. I don’t want to scream and cry and get myself upset and in a state, they’ve not helped anyway... Complains especially on gender issues are no use. The organizational hierarchy is still rigid and it is not easy to launch a complaint.”

Ka Man concluded that gender inequality still existed in the workplace. She pointed out, finally, that the notion of sameness and difference between women and men is only an excuse. It was used to justify the unfair treatment of women in the workplace. Her working experience tells us that inequality still happens in every aspect of her work.

From the experience of Ka man, it is clear that the construction of the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity is taking place in a subtle way and these meanings are also constructed and negotiated within different and sometimes competing discourses. Difference discourses are developed based on the expectations of employers



and supervisors, the social interaction and interpersonal relationships or even the organizational and management structure.

The experience of Ka Man is not unique; another informant, Lei Fung has similar experience. When Lei Fung was asked to share her work experiences related to gender equality, she quoted the following examples.

“Generally speaking, male medical officers and female medical officers are doing the same jobs and receive the same benefits in public hospitals. However, male medical officers are often favoured in many ways. The traditional sex role stereotype, that is, male doctors and female nurses is still influential. There have been so many times I was being called ‘nurse’ instead of ‘doctor’ even though I was wearing the white coat... There are so many situations in which I am uncomfortable. I have come across some patients who did not have any trust in a female doctor. They thought that female doctors are not as professional and experienced as male doctors. They even defined female doctors as ‘second class doctors’ and were only the ‘helpers’ of male doctors.”

As a doctor, Lei Fung claimed that patient’s trust and respect are very important during the period of treatment. However, she felt that she was not as trusted and respected by the patients as those male doctors. According to Lei Fung, is kind of subtle and social uneasiness happens throughout her work life. Sometimes, it makes her feel that she is not as good as her male colleagues. Once again, social interaction was a very important element in the construction of gender equality in the workplace. Since Lei Fung experienced different degree of “mistrust” from her patients, she sometimes felt lost and began to question her own ability.

Lei Fung also pointed out that there still existed vertical and horizontal gender segregation of work in the medical profession.

“Female doctors are usually concentrated in some specialities such as paediatrics and internal medicine. Male doctors are usually in other specialities such as surgery. Although at present, the salary and the salary structure are the same under the Hospital Authority, there is still a general impression that surgeons are the best in doctors. Neural surgeons and cardiothoracic surgeons are thought to be the best of the best and over 90% of them are men. Besides, I do think that there is a steady trail of promotion for men. Most of the senior medical officers and consultants are men.”

Lei Fung pointed out that, in the past, she wanted to be a surgeon. She once thought that she was very suitable to be a surgeon because she had a pair of small hands. But, one of her friends told her to think it over seriously. Her friend told her about the terrible working hours and the fact that she had to work shifts. As a junior surgeon, the situation might be better because you were usually responsible for some small surgeries. But, when you had finished your training and became a surgeon, you might be the only one or two or three in the hospital that knew how to do the surgery. So, you could imagine how the situation would be. In fact, some senior doctors suggested that working mothers should not be surgeons. Lei Fung said that, as a married woman and planning to have baby at that time, she thought it would be better for her to give up. She said,

“A surgeon is supposed to work all the time and never have a life. You have to give up some parts of your life. In most cases, a man can afford these sacrifices because his wife will support him. But, as a married woman, it is difficult. It explains why women are still relatively rare in the highly prestigious areas of surgery, radiology and cardiology. Actually, some consultants have the opinion that the energy, drive and commitment required of being a surgeon is beyond what most women can offer because of their family involvements.”

Lei Fung commented that, to a certain extent, it was unfair to women. She thought that, if the system and the working hours arrangements could be improved to

enable working mothers to have stable working hours, more women could become surgeons. However, to most of the senior doctors, it was their “culture” and “usual practice.” They say that nothing can be changed. In fact, they were proud of themselves being so busy because it indicated that they were very important. Since, by definition, both women and men were welcomed, the senior doctors and the people at management level did not consider it as unfair and unequal to women. It was just something to do with personal choice. The irregular working hours and the need to work when ever necessary were viewed as the “culture” and “tradition” of the job. In fact, it did not involve the issue of fairness.

Lei Fung finally chose to be a physician. Even though she sometimes had to work the night shift, at least she could have an “on-call list” every month and could know when she could have a day off. Another thing was that Lei Fung had more woman colleagues and some of them were also working mothers. So, they could talk and share their experiences.

Lei Fung’s experience illustrates clearly how gender equality is constructed and negotiated in the workplace. Once again, it is constructed in a subtle way which is difficult to detect. There are a lot of systems, arrangements and practices in the workplace which are constructed to place women in a disadvantaged position. There are also numerous norms, values, traditions and cultures which are constructed to worsen the situation.

Apart from the above, Lei Fung also shared the unhappiest experience in her working life. Several years ago, when she was qualified to attend a special examination

MRCP, she was pregnant. This examination was very important to every doctor but the passing rate was quite low. Some doctors would give up after having failed for several times. Lei Fung claimed that she studied very hard despite her pregnancy and finally she passed. However, she knew that many of her colleagues, both male and female, queried why she did pass. Some of them even said that she did only pass because she was pregnant. They commented that the examiners were too kind and generous to her. Some male colleagues also made jokes about her by saying "Oh my god! I think I can never pass the MRCP because I can never get pregnant."

Lei Fung inimically was very proud of herself because, despite of her pregnancy, she worked very hard and she did pass the MRCP. She also thought that people would have similar ways of thinking as she and would share her success and happiness. However, according to Lei Fung, the outcome was "unbelievable." Sometimes, she hoped she would not have passed so that she would have a much easier time about it. In her own words,

"If I could choose, may be I will choose not to pass the examination, because, at least, I can have a much easier time about it. I hate people talking behind my back. It makes me feel being excluded and being isolated. I'm so afraid of these situations that I really don't know how to handle them. In the worst situation, I will also query my ability. It is true that, at some that moments, I almost believe that what they are saying is correct, and that is I only passed because I'm pregnant. I hope it won't happen again in the future, otherwise I'm afraid I cannot bear it at all."

The experience of Lei Fung tells us that, even though she could enter a male dominated profession, she still has to face a lot of problems, just because she is a woman rather than a man. Her story also reveals that, despite their entry into a male

dominated profession, women continue to cluster in the lower echelons of hierarchies and are concentrated in some specialities.

Woman-unfriendly working environment, inhospitable and even hostile environments are critical in how gender equality in the workplace is constructed. It is especially true in the male dominated occupations, such as the medical profession. Nobody wants to be isolated and neglected in the workplace, as being reported by Lei Fung. Nobody wants one's ability to be questioned by others. Lei Fung's story demonstrates that the success of women can easily be constructed as being based on many other things. These can be luck, beauty, pregnancy and so on, instead of their abilities. This kind of "backlash" is also very important in the construction of the meanings of gender equality in the workplace.

Like Ka Man, Lei Fung agreed that she was much angrier the first time she had come across these unfair and unequal treatments. But, as time goes by, her feeling was not that strong and she would not be so angry again, especially when she found that other people did not understand her feelings or could not understand why she was so angry. As a result, her best way to deal with it was to try and forget everything. As told by Lei Fung, she would try to forget these unhappy experiences. However and very unhappily, these experiences were still alive at the bottom of her heart which was why Lei Fung said she was less ambitious and would pay more attention to her family instead of her job.

Apart from Ka Man and Lei Fung, Ah Fong also shared the unfair treatment that she had experienced in her work life.

“As I have told you before, my first job was as a junior in a local comics company. The company belonged to my uncle and that’s why I had the chance to work there. At that time, I was the only one female in the company. I liked drawing and painting very much and I could draw quite well. It was a common practice that you had to follow a teacher and the teacher would teach you the required techniques. However, no teacher was willing to accept me. They all thought that this girl was just for fun. There was an unspoken assumption that it’s a male industry. Finally, without any other choice, I left this industry... Until now, I can still remember how the men in the company looked at me. The way they looked at me was so strange, unfriendly and sometimes hostile that made you uneasy. I also found myself surrounded by sexual jokes, pornographic humor and teasing.”

Even though Ah Fong left this presumably male-dominated industry, discrimination and unfair treatment still followed her when she entered the garment industry.

“The garment industry is in no way better. Women workers at that time were usually concentrated in the positions of sewing machinist. Even though women workers could earn quite a lot of money, they were not respected by others and did not enjoy much development. Everyone just called you ‘factory girl’ (工廠妹) and a factory girl knew nothing (工廠妹識咩).”

The experience of Ah Fong indeed is not unique. We can hear very similar stories from the older generation. There are also many local studies telling us that although factory girls in the 70s and 80s could earn a reasonable amount of money to support their families, their status as still low both inside and outside the family (Salaff, 1981).

According to Ah Fong, in the past, no one talked about gender equality in the workplace. It might be because the workplace was a “man’s place”, and therefore it was ridiculous to talk or even think about gender equality in this man’s place. Nowadays, it is true that there are more voices for gender equality in many aspects of our lives;

however, Ah Fong was not satisfied with the present situation. As an active member in a local women's group, she had the following comments:

“After the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, on the surface, women seem to be protected. It is unlawful for an employer to hire a person just because of one's sex. Woman and man should receive the same wages and benefits if they are in the same job. However, instead of being protected, some women are suffer due to the legislation. Let's take casual workers working in the convenience shops as an example. Before the passage of the law, most of the working mothers were not allowed to work the night shift. But now, they are required to work the night shift because if only men are required to work the night shift, it is unfair to men. Thus, I think that some women, especially those in the lower classes, cannot benefit from the legislation.”

Ah Fong said that, as a health care assistant, she also experienced gender inequality in her workplace after the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance. According to Ah Fong, the duty of a health care assistant involved meal delivery, helping the elderly to clean up their bodies and their home and so on. On the whole, there was no gender division of labour in her job. However, Ah Fong said that the so-called “difficult clients” were usually assigned to female health care assistants. There was a general impression that women were better at dealing with difficult clients, because they were more caring, gentle and soft.

Ah Fong believed that this informal gender division of labour, based on “general impression”, was unfair to woman workers. She pointed out that not all women were gentle and soft. Some of them, including Ah Fong, were not good at taking care of others. She described herself as not feminine enough. Therefore, Ah Fong thought that it was unequal and unfair to assign the difficult clients to them just because they were

women. Ah Fong said that it was very difficult to voice her views to the supervisors, because the arrangement was only an informal practice and was not written down.

On the other hand, before the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, women workers could be exempted from some tough tasks. But after the passage of the legislation, woman workers were required to do all the tasks, no matter what the nature of the work was. Ah Fong used two Chinese words (搵笨) to describe this. She was confused whether the law was to protect women or to protect men.

Ah Fong's is a typical example that the passage of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance can have negative effect on women workers. It reflects the general impression that the Sex Discrimination Ordinance is to guarantee the same treatment of women and men in the workplace. However, in most cases, the male standard and norm are thought to be the normal and usual standard and are taken for granted. As a result, women workers are required to follow these norms and standards. To most people, it is not unfair to women. On the contrary, if women have some sort of special treatment, it will be constructed as unfair to men.

As a conclusion, the stories and experiences of my informants tell us how gender operates to construct life chances differently for women and men. According to my informants, women are still in a disadvantaged position in the workplace, no matter what the nature of the job is.

The three informants believe that women and men are at the same time different and the same. They are the same in some ways but are different in other ways. All of them also point out that the notions of the sameness or difference of women are usually



being used to justify and rationalize unequal and unfair treatment of women in the workplace.

As well, the three interviewees appearing in this chapter throw light upon a phenomenon that different discourses around the notions of gender equality, equal opportunity, sameness and difference are operating at the same time. In most cases, contradictory and inconsistent discourses are being constructed simultaneously to place women in a disadvantaged position in the workplace.

Finally, I want to highlight that disappointment, being upset, anger and frustration were very common feelings when my informants face unfair and unequal treatments in the workplace. Sometimes, they also have the feeling that they are being insulted and they do not know how to respond to the unfair situation. Some of them tried to do something to improve the situation in the past, but, when they found that it was useless and that other people could not accept what they were doing, they kept silent and didn't do anything further.

Having discussed in detail the various understandings and, perceptions of and attitudes about male-female sameness and difference, as well as the experiences of the informants, we now have a better understanding of how the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are being constructed and negotiated in the workplace. We will conclude this study in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Conclusion**

In this concluding chapter, I will, first, sum up the discussions presented in the earlier chapters. Then, I will make a concluding remark and try to highlight the practical implications of my study. In the last section, I will then offer some suggestions for future practice in handling the issue of women's employment in Hong Kong.

#### **8.1 Summary of the Previous Chapters**

In the first two chapters of this study, I have, first, of all introduced the background of this study and have demonstrated the importance of the issue of women and employment in Hong Kong. Based on various evidence, it is true to say that gender inequality still exists in contemporary Hong Kong. I have also discussed the legal reform and development of government policy in dealing with the issue of gender inequality. It is true to say that both the colonial government and the SARS government were and are slow and passive in handling the issue of gender inequality in Hong Kong. This issue has been and continuous to be low on the government's list of priorities. In the last part of chapter two, I have also highlighted the importance of further study in this area. I have pointed out that, although there have been numerous studies and much research on gender inequality in the workplace in Hong Kong, none of them aim at understanding and capturing how the concepts pf gender inequality and equal opportunities are being understood.

In chapter three, I have provided a theoretical discussion of the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. The individualist as well as the structuralist perspectives in analyzing the issue of gender inequality in employment have been reviewed in detail. The weaknesses of these approaches have also been discussed, and because of the inadequacy of these approaches, a new way of understanding has been necessary. Therefore, poststructuralist feminist theory, which has provided another way of considering the social relations which explain the subordinate position occupied by women in the labour force, has been adopted as the theoretical framework of this study.

In chapter four, the methodological design of this study has been discussed. I have pointed out the reasons for choosing the qualitative research methodology and method in this study. I have also highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of in-depth interviews which is the main research method of this study. The research process has also been revealed.

Chapter five, six and seven provide the findings of this study. I have demonstrated the different perceptions of the respondents towards the argument of women's sameness as and difference to men. Their understandings, conceptions and attitudes towards gender reflecting on equality and equal opportunity also been discussed. Finally, the construction of the various meanings of gender equality has been discussed through reflecting on the working experiences of the respondents. Generally speaking, each respondent has her unique understanding and attitude towards gender equality and equal opportunity in the workplace. All of their comments are valuable as many of their comments go well beyond of what I expected. Many of my respondents have pointed out that they seldom think about the problem of gender inequality and

equal opportunity in the workplace. Thus, some of them find it difficult to discuss what these concepts mean to them, especially at the beginning of the interview. All these issues will be further discussed in the following section.

## **8.2 Concluding Remarks about the Findings and Implications of this Study**

The findings of this study have offered important and valuable insights about the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. In general, there are four areas which are worthy of further discussion.

### ***8.2.1 Confusion and ambivalence about the concepts of gender equality, equal opportunity, sameness and difference***

The findings of this study suggest that there are competing meanings and discourses around the notions of gender equality and equal opportunity. There are also several conflicting accounts of sameness of and difference between the two sexes which inform different common-sense assumptions about gender equality and equal opportunity. The women's responses illustrate clearly that women can develop very different understandings and perceptions of and about towards the meaning of gender equality, equal opportunity, sameness and difference and these understandings are crucial and central for the examination of gender inequality in the workplace and they cannot be substituted by statistics, figures and numbers.

In general, the respondents develop three different perspectives towards the notion of male-female difference. Some of them (Ah Wai, Ah Lin, Ah Po, Siu King and Wing Yin) think that women and men are different. To a large extent, they base this difference on biological and physical difference even though their focus may be a little

bit different. Despite this, they share one common view: all of them point out that, because of their differences, men are usually preferred in the workplace.

Some of them (Ah Shan, Mei Yee, Ah Hing and Hoi Lam) believe that women and men are the same. However, they have developed various ideas on this notion. For instance, Ah Shan reflects her liberal and individualist thinking on this issue and insists that each one should be the same. Hoi Lam points out that the two sexes are the same when they are small, but, what makes them become different when they grown up is the socialization process.

Others (Ka Man, Lei Fung and Ah Fong) point out that women are at the same time different and the same as men. They find that either considering women the same as men or different from men is problematic. They also consider their views as “uncommon” and even “strange”, because most people will choose to identify with one of these sides.

It is also apparent that the understandings and perceptions of some of the respondents are inconsistent and on shaky ground. One typical example is Ah Lin, who I have mentioned in chapter five. Ah Lin’s understanding of male-female difference has been inconsistent. At some moments, she insists that women and men are different and should take up different jobs. But, at other moment, she changes her mind and points out that women and men may be the same and can take up the same jobs. This shifting attitude is not uncommon among other respondents. Another example is the case of Mei Yee who I have introduced in chapter six. Basically, she thinks that women and men are the same. But, at some times in the interview, she queries whether she is right

or not. In fact, except Ah Shan, Ka Man and Lei Fung whose opinions are more consistent because they point out that they sometimes think about the issue of gender equality, most of the comments and opinions of other respondents are shaky, inconsistent and even contradictory in some way or other.

The respondents also develop different understandings of and attitudes towards gender equality and equal opportunity. Some of them point out that gender equality is no different from equal opportunity and same treatment. They generally believe that equal opportunity and same treatment are the ways to achieve gender equality. Other interviewees argue that gender equality should be something more than equal opportunity. Accordingly, same treatment between the two sexes is not enough.

Within their own versions of understanding gender equality and equal opportunity, the respondents also have developed different attitudes towards the issue, both positive and negative. For instance, Ah Shan and Hoi Lam have developed very positive attitudes towards their versions of gender equality. On the other hand, Mei Yee and Ah Po have developed negative attitudes.

From the above analysis, I have illustrated the confusion and ambivalence about the concepts of gender equality, equal opportunity, sameness and difference. It is clear that my emphasis is not so much on whether the two sexes are really the same or not, but on understanding how sameness or difference between women and men are constructed, produced, and negotiated in shaping the meanings of gender equality in the workplace. Finally, I want to stress that the confusion and ambivalence are dangerous

in themselves, because they make the manipulation of the meanings of these concepts very easy, which will be further discussed in the following sections.

### **8.2.2 *Maintain the status quo and disempower women***

The women's responses shows us the ways in which the meanings of the concepts of sameness, difference, gender equality and equal opportunity can shift or be used ambiguously depending on the context. It is also apparent that the confusion and ambivalence around these concepts can be used and manipulated to disempower women and to keep the status quo of gender inequality in the workplace. In fact, this is what is happening in the experience of the respondents.

In most cases, only the more powerful sex can manipulate the definitions and concepts and make use of different discourses to maintain the status quo of gender inequality in the workplace. There are many areas in which the manipulation of concepts and meanings can take place. Social and interpersonal relationships, tradition and other values systems are some of the potential areas I have identified in this study. These are parts of the battle needed to determine the day-to-day practices of women's work life.

Some of the informants (Ah Wai, Ah Po and Ah Hing) have pointed out that fighting for gender equality is not what their generation gets involved in. To them, gender equality is something "fashion able" and only the young and well educated ladies can enjoy gender equality. In fact, the concept of gender equality is sometimes being constructed as "radical" and "aggressive" and is thought to be unacceptable within our Chinese tradition. Generally speaking, virtues, such as submissiveness,

shyness, passivity, reticence are appreciated in the Chinese culture and women who possess these qualities are therefore highly appreciated. Besides, the notion that cohesion is good, but that conflicts and disputes are bad is still prevailing. Similar notions have been highlighted by many of the respondents in the interview. Thus, even though, on the surface, it seems that there are different “meanings” being produced, most of them are socially legitimated and are reflecting common understandings of gender relations. Within this culture, one can imagine that asking for gender equality, which is thought to be radical, is not an easy task to do. In fact, I think more work should be done on examining how the meaning of gender equality is constructed within Chinese tradition and culture. It can help us to explore and examine in more detail how the construction of meaning is neither entirely arbitrary nor absolute or eternal.

Many of my respondents (Ah Hing, Ka Man and Lei Fung) have also pointed out that they are afraid of uncomfortable situations, inhospitable and hostile working environments as well as non-harmonious relationships that may result if they voice their request for more equal treatment in their workplace. All this renders them vulnerable, feeling helpless and excluded. It can be best illustrated from the experience of Lei Fung. Instead of being appreciated for making extra efforts, Lei Fung was said to pass her examination only because she was pregnant. Her success is being constructed and manipulated as something to do with her pregnancy by her male colleagues. Even though the working environment is still harmonious, Lei Fung feels that she has been looked down upon by her colleagues. She feels that people are looking at her in a strange way and that they will talk behind her back. Thus, the creation of tensions can activate hierarchical relationships in the workplace. In most cases, even though they are



aware of the problem, they will just keep silent. As a consequence, the status quo is maintained.

As a result, it is apparent that the meanings of gender equality and equal opportunity are negotiated and manipulated to empower some groups and disable others. In most situations, women are powerless in refusing and resisting the manipulation of concepts and meanings.

### ***8.2.3 Women as active agent***

The findings of this study have also shown how women are indeed involved as active participants in the construction of the meanings of gender equality. The interviews with the informants suggest that the understandings and, perceptions of, and attitudes about gender equality can be very different as has been discussed in the above section. Although there was a shared opinion that men are still the powerful sex in the workplace, the informants have developed their own ways of understanding and their attitudes towards the meanings of gender equality and their own ways to achieve gender equality. As mentioned before, these understandings are not random but also not fixed since they are constantly being produced and constructed within particular contexts.

From the interviews with the respondents, we can find that women can act as active agents in reinforcing or resisting gender inequality in the workplace. Ah Wai, Siu King, Ka Man and Lei Fung point out that they have voiced or have done something to resist the unequal treatment in their workplace. For example, Ka Man says that she has made a complaint to her supervisor when she has encountered with unequal treatment. However, many of them, including Ka Man, remark that it is a difficult task.

Sometimes, they are not being listened and are even being labeled as “troublesome.” As a result, in most cases, they have to give up after making some efforts and attempts.

On the other hand, women can act to reinforce gender inequality in the workplace. Ah Po, Ah Lin and Ah Hing choose to keep silent and to accept the unequal treatment in their workplace. To a large extent, it keeps reinforcing gender inequality.

It is also worthy to note that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish resisting responses from reinforcing responses. The experience of Ah Shan is a typical example. In order to catch up with her male colleagues, Ah Shan has to work twice as hard to prove herself. To Ah Shan, it is a way to achieve gender equality by showing to others that women are as competent as men. However, Ah Shan does not ask why it is women instead of men who have to work so hard to prove themselves. Thus, instead of challenging the discrimination of women and the unequal treatment towards women, the response of Ah Shan merely helps to keep the status quo.

The above examples illustrate that the difference between resistance to and reinforcement of the status quo, is unclear. The situations and experiences of women are often very unclear, complex and complicated. The meanings attached to women’s situations and experiences, for example whether to resist or to reinforce, are also complicated. Once again, it draws our attention to the importance of the construction of meaning at different levels of discussion.

From the above analysis, it is necessary to take into account the subjectivity of women when trying to understand the issue of women and employment. Their experiences, perceptions, feelings and emotions should be taken seriously whether at the

academic level, the policy level or the legislation level. I think that it is crucial how women understand gender equality whether it is maintained or transformed.

#### ***8.2.4 Theoretical implications***

From the women's responses, there are obviously three discourses surrounding the discussion of gender equality in the workplace. These are the discourse of "women are different from men", the discourse of "women are the same as men" as well as the discourse of "women are at the same time different and are the same as men." It is obvious that these three discourses can be linked with some of the theoretical assumptions of the various approaches which have been discussed in chapter three.

The discourse of "women are different from men" mainly derives from the theories linked with biological essentialism and human capital. "Biological difference" between the two sexes was highlighted by many of the respondents. Ah Wai, Ah Lin, Ah Po, Siu King and Wing Yin point out that women and men are different. All of them also believe men are stronger. Some of them even point out that men are smarter, cleverer, calmer, more objective, more decisive and all these are important qualities in the workplace. In most cases, biological difference is used to justify different treatments of the two sexes. However, from the experiences of the respondents, it is obvious that considering women as different from men is problematic. As mentioned in the previous section, some of the respondents also query whether women are indeed different from men even though they originally agree that women and men are different.

The discourse of "women and men are the same" can derive from theories of liberal feminism as well as structural feminism. Under this discourse, the difference

between the two sexes is minimized and is viewed as unimportant. The women's responses illustrate that this discourse is also influential and powerful. Four of the respondents (Ah Shan, Mei Yee, Ah Hing and Hoi Lam) agree that women and men are the same. Under this discourse, gender equality can be constructed as "same treatment" of the two sexes by the practice of equal opportunity. However, considering women as the same as men is also problematic. From the experiences of the respondents, treating women as if they are men is problematic in the workplace. Some of the respondents also highlight that women are not the same as men in most situations.

Finally, the discourse of "women and men are at the same time different and are the same" reflects very much the assumptions of poststructuralist feminism. Within this discourse, it is apparent that women should not be treated either as different or as the same as men. Both positions are problematic. The notions of Ka Man, Lei Fung and Ah Fong confirm that there have been some people who have come to believe that women are neither different from nor the same as men. It also draws our attention to the "equality-versus-difference" debate and points out that equality should not reject the notion of differences. Although these respondents cannot clearly demonstrate their understanding of gender equality, they point out that gender should not reject differences. They think that equality should respect differences. It is true to say that the emphasis on difference within poststructuralist feminism can broaden our understandings towards the meanings of gender equality. However, the claim of difference can be easily shifted back into an individualized problem. When the difference of women in relation to men is stressed, discourses such as "personal choice", "free choice", "individual problem" can be constructed to manipulate the request for

“difference” in asking for gender equality. A typical example is the individualist approach to difference and diversity which has emerged from the New Right.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness among feminists and women’s labour scholars of the problem associated with thinking about working women as being either different from or the same as working men in Hong Kong. Both positions have been shown to disadvantage women as workers. Therefore, running through this study is the suggestion that there is the possibility of another way of thinking about women employees today. I point to the need for women to be seen as both the same as and different from men because seeing women as either different or the same as men can place them in a disadvantaged position. However, we should be cautious about the manipulation of concepts and definitions.

As a result, I would argue that in both theory and practice, the confusion around the concepts of equality, equal opportunity, sameness and difference offers a new challenge to both conceptualizing and tackling the issues of gender equality in employment. I believe that if, in the future, we are to deal more adequately with the issue of gender equality, it is necessary for us to look beyond the artificial polarities of sameness and difference, equality and difference and explore ways in which theory can be made compatible with the local and with practice.

### **8.3 Suggestions**

Based on all the above discussions and understanding of gender equality in the workplace, I have developed some insights and suggestions in dealing with this issue.

First of all, legislations and laws about equal opportunities are necessary in promoting equal opportunities between the two sexes and in making sure no discrimination is taking place. However, the present legislations and policies of equal opportunities in Hong Kong are limited in their effects, because they are still based on a conventional understanding of equality and difference. To a large extent, they still see women as the same as men. Even though they can benefit some women, such as younger, more educated and so on, some women are still left behind. Other than making sure no direct discrimination is taking place, it is necessary to make sure that no indirect discrimination and other forms of discrimination are taking place. As informed by this research study, the issue of gender inequality is becoming more subtle and sometimes invisible. Thus, the legislations and policies should be more sensitive to this issue and more sophisticated policies are required. Unfortunately, many of the present legislations and policies help to legitimate and enforce some common beliefs and traditional assumptions of gender roles and gender relations rather than to transform them. As suggested by many feminists, the concepts of “gender-mainstreaming” can be employed at the legislative and policy level to promote gender equality. Also, as pointed by Fiona Williams, Jennie Popay and Ann Oakley, an analysis of policy-making and provision should include people’s own definitions, understandings, meanings, and experiences of the issues in hand and their preferred ways of dealing with these. And, only in this way that policy provision would be more firmly within a user-led approach. Although legislation and policies are important, fighting for gender equality cannot be limited to the legislative and policy levels and that legislation cannot cover every possible development. Thus, in the following, I want to suggest other ways to promote gender equality.

Since women are still a powerless sex, the manipulation of definitions and concepts of gender equality and equal opportunities can disempower women and keep the status quo. Thus, what we need is a new way of understanding of equality and difference. In fact, implicit in my argument is a rejection of the binary opposition of equality and difference and I believe very much that it is extremely important.

In addition, I also believe that the construction of gender equality, equal opportunity, sameness and difference is a negotiated process and that women should be active agents within it. Thus, their agency is a powerful source in changing their situations. Communicating well with each other and supporting each other can enable women to uncover and challenge the confusion and ambivalence towards these concepts and to resist the negative impacts discussed before. Counter-discourses and definitions, which challenge the taken-for-granted discourses and understandings, and the creation of a culture in which certain ways of acting become more and others less acceptable are also necessary. In concrete practice, more public debates and discussions on the issue of gender equality as well as various concepts related to it should be carried out. From the experiences of the respondents, they seldom reflect on gender equality when nothing happens. However, when problems come out, they often do not know how to handle them or they just to keep silent. Thus, more sharing and discussions are extremely important and necessary.

It should also be noted that the diversity and separate contributions of both women and men should be equally valued and rewarded. Equality should include respect for difference so that people's particular circumstances are acknowledged, otherwise it is only a kind of pseudo-equality. Although it may be difficult in real

practice, especially on the policy and legislative level, it should be treated as a goal and as a direction. I hope, at least to a certain extent that, my study could have implications for rethinking social policy. I also believe that fighting for a form of equality that does not preclude difference will be a promising project for the future.



## **Appendix I**

### **Guidelines of Interview**

#### **A. Demographic Details**

- Age
- Marital status
- Number of children and their age
- Educational level

#### **B. Work History**

- At what age did you complete full-time education?
- Can you tell me in detail about your work history? For example, what types of jobs you have worked for, how long have you stayed in these jobs, do you like your jobs and whatever you want to tell.
- What are the reasons for choosing these jobs? And what are the reasons for leaving these jobs?
- Have you had any breaks in your working career?

#### **C. Present Job**

- What is your current job?
- Can you describe the nature of your job? For example, what are your job duties, what's your post, if you don't mind, your salary and so on.

#### **D. Understandings of Gender Difference**

- What do you think about gender difference? Do you think women and men are the same or different? Can you give me some examples of your opinions.

#### **E. Understandings of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities**

- What do you think about gender equality and equal opportunities? You can tell us whatever you think in relation to these two terms.

#### **F. Working Experience**

- What would you say are your main reasons for choosing your jobs in the past or at present?
- What is the sexual division of labour in your job?
- How would you compare the position of women and men in your workplace?
- How would you describe the relationship between the two sexes in your workplace?
- Have you encountered any unequal treatment because of your sex in your workplace?
- How would you describe your feelings about your job?
- On the whole, are you satisfied with your job?

#### **G. Experiences of Unequal Treatment**

- Have you encountered any unequal treatment in your workplace? Can you share with me your feelings?
- How did you handle this unequal treatment?

#### **H. Others**

- Do you have anything else to tell about the issues we have already talked about?

*\*Since it is a semi-structured interview, the above guidelines do not cover all the aspects which may come across in each interview. The areas and topics mostly follow the flow of the interview. Thus, the questions being asked in each interview may not be the same or in the same sequences.*

## Appendix II

### Profile of the Informants

Name	Age	Marital status	No.of children	Edu. level	Post	Full/Part-time	Monthly income
Ah Wai	44	M	2	P. 6	Packaging worker	Part-time	\$2,000
Ah Lin	45	M	2	F. 3	Supervisor	Full-time	\$10,000
Ah Po	41	M	3	F. 3	Casual worker	Full-time	\$6,000
Siu King	23	S	/	F. 5	Shopkeeper	Full-time	\$9,000
Wing Yin	29	S	/	F. 5	Clerical assistant	Full-time	\$13,000
Ah Shan	28	S	/	Degree	Manager	Full-time	\$30,000
Mei Yee	35	M	/	F. 5	Shipping clerk	Full-time	\$10,000
Ah Hing	50	M	3	P. 6	School amah	Full-time	\$6,000
Hoi Lam	37	S	/	Diploma	Kindergarten teacher	Full-time	\$15,000
Ka Man	32	S	/	Degree	Social Worker	Full-time	\$30,000
Lei Fung	40	M	1	Degree	Doctor	Full-time	\$90,000
Ah Fong	52	M	4	P. 6	Health care worker	Full-time	\$5,000

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