

Helping women and women entrepreneurs to help themselves

Women's Status in Taiwan

Since the 1970s, with Ms. Hsiu-lien Lu's advocacy of "New Feminism" and Ms. Yuan-chen Li's establishment of The Awakening magazine, gender issues gradually caught public attention in Taiwan. Later, the number of women's groups and the influence of women's movements have had considerable progress after the release of Martial Law in 1987. Thus, the following 1990s became the 'rapid-growing period' for women movements in Taiwan. Several regulations related to women's rights were promulgated during this period, and many women-related NGOs were established to provide different services for women of different backgrounds. Although gender issues are much highly emphasized in Taiwan nowadays, there is still a long way to go in many aspects.

From a comparative viewpoint, women in Taiwan's business world own a relatively higher profile and enjoy much more freedom than their counterparts in other Asian countries. Statistics can justify this statement. For example, 33.87% of enterprises in Taiwan are women-owned and 10% of large-sized enterprises are run by women. The performance of Taiwanese business women is as good as their counterparts in the developed societies such as the United States and Canada. Apart from that, there are plenty business owner's wives who do not appear in the category of official statistics mentioned above, yet play important roles in running small and medium enterprises. Actually they are *de facto* women entrepreneurs.

The culture background of women entrepreneurs in Taiwan

However, if we go into the detail and make a qualitative analysis of the business they run, we then can find that there are still a lot for Taiwanese business women to catch up. Several things can be mentioned:

Firstly, the business women run are largely micro-business, small and medium enterprises, and the average turnover of women-owned business

is only one-third of their male-counterparts.

Secondly, women entrepreneurs tend to focus on some specific kinds of business, such as retailing business, service-oriented business, education-related business and business mainly catering for domestic markets.

Thirdly, married-women tend to be less enterprising and less adventurous than married-man. In short, there is still a wide space waiting to be developed by woman entrepreneurs.

Take myself as an example, as a middle-aged business woman, I have experienced various difficulties in the process of setting up and managing my own business. Some are especially notable. Before the age of thirty-five, the idea of setting up my own business had never occurred to me. Since a kid, I had been taught that the ideal of life was like a housewife's one. To play domestic roles properly, bringing up children and serving my husband are the ideas occupying my mind and directing my life-style. It is a cultural matter, and there was, and still is, plenty Taiwanese women like me then.

After opening up my own business, the pressure then immediately came from my family. My husband, a university professor, was very much stuck by the traditional notion of good family. That means a rather simple life. I was expected to fix dinner for the whole family members and to have family get-together every Sunday. That was just impossible for a business woman who was at the initial stage of establishing her own business.

My husband eventually changed his idea, but it took a painful long time in doing that. Inevitably I was bound to face other difficulties that nearly all business women would encounter. As our adventure would not be taken seriously and normally would not get the whole-heart support from our spouse or other family members, our start-up investment capital would be limited.

The difficulties for start-ups

My start-up capital came from my personal savings. It is therefore not surprising to understand that women entrepreneurs are often owners of micro-business or small and medium enterprises.

For many Taiwanese businesswomen, to secure adequate loan from banks or other financial institutions can be a difficult matter. They often involve complicated procedures. In addition to this, women are often victims of bankers' prejudices; women are not reckoned by bankers to be credible in new business start-ups. Most notably, as women are less adventurous and more reserved in taking initiatives the size of their business is no wonder small.

So long as they start up their business, women then would come across other challenges. To name only some. Business women are often short of professional knowledge and skills in the down-to-earth management of their business. They are also in difficult position to win business partners as the world of business is mostly dominated by male. Above all, their personal connection is normally confined by their own kind, which would restrict their stretching capacity.

How the Taiwanese government can help on these matters?

I have given a rough sketch regarding the difficulties that business women may come across in Taiwan. One category concerns with the Chinese culture that Taiwanese women inherit; the other is more to do with the real world of business. How the Taiwanese government can help on these matters? As far as I know, Taiwanese government has done something for women who want to have their own business. To mention just one thing. Since the year of 2002, National Youth Commission of the Executive Yuan, set up Free and Young Program (Flying Goose Program) aimed at incubating women entrepreneurs. More than that, several central government agencies are also offering start-up loan for the young and women. For women who want to start up their business and to pick new skills, there is abundant information available from websites. On the

whole, there is no doubt that the government policies take a rather encouraging stance towards women entrepreneurship. Whether there are effective, that is another issue.

How about the cultural element which may hinder the development of women entrepreneurship in the first place? Taiwan has been under dramatic social change. And the direction of change is towards western democracy within which the development of individuality and individual autonomy are highly valued. So much so that I think woman's gain of a more equal social and economic status in the near future will be a must. It is on this ground that I am quite optimistic about the flourishing of women entrepreneurship for the time to come in Taiwan.

We need more help to help ourselves!

Having said that, I do not mean that the government has done enough as far as the promotion of women entrepreneurship is concerned. Even though the government has taken various sorts of policy to encourage women starting up their business and to support their management, it has not managed to obtain sufficient statistics on women entrepreneurs. It is therefore doubtful whether the government is able to take effective strategies to help business women. Apart from that, the government ought to look at how other nations are doing in terms of helping women entrepreneurs. As far as I know, the United States, Russia, Canada, South Korea etc. have already had government agency especially for women entrepreneurs, so that they can secure professional help, and financial support if necessary. These countries have set examples for Taiwan. It is the government job to take preferential treatment in helping women entrepreneurs without hesitation.

For the sake of women themselves and the society as whole, the government is obligated to take positive actions in helping women. Conference like this is most appreciated here.

-- BY SHELLEY WANG --