

## Equal Ground: Taiwan Women in a Modern Society

Over the past century, women have greatly changed society and gender equality is now a mainstream social value. The Republic of China (Taiwan) is no different, with the country making real headway on promoting equality between the sexes and women's rights protection.

This progress is illustrated by Taiwan's second-place ranking among 149 countries and territories, behind the Netherlands and far above most Asian neighbors, according to an assessment produced by the ROC government based on the United Nations Development Programme 2012 Gender Inequality Index.

The change in status for Taiwan's women is reflected in aspects spanning education, employment, political participation and socioeconomic status.

In Taiwan, the percentage of women under the age of 40 with higher education is 61.3, which is above that of men at 57.2. As another example, in 2014 Academia Sinica, the country's top research institution, elected 18 new academicians, with five of them female, the highest on record.

### **Glass ceiling no more**

Women have also made significant contributions to the nation's economic development. For the past 20 years (1993-2013), the female working population in Taiwan expanded 45.98 percent, much faster than males at 12.8 percent, with the female labor force participation rate topping 50 percent for the first time in 2012. These

numbers indicate that more women are entering the workplace to pursue their own careers and fulfill their professional aspirations.

They are also fast catching up in socioeconomic status. The income gap between genders is narrowing. Twenty years ago, the average income of women in Taiwan was less than 70 percent of that of men. This number has increased to 80 percent. The percentage of local businesses headed by women has remained 36 percent in the past two years.

### **Increasing political influence**

More women are engaging in public service, bringing their perspectives into the representation system. Female lawmakers account for 33.6 percent of Taiwan's legislature, which is higher than the global average of 21.9 percent, according to the 2014 statistics of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In Asia, this is second only to East Timor and ahead of South Korea at 15.7 percent and Japan at 8.1 percent.

The passage of the Act of Gender Equality in Employment in 2002 and Gender Equity Education Act in 2004 is the dividend of female political participation in Taiwan. It is

also the government's response to calls from female groups for a legal basis and dedicated agency to promote gender equality.

Examples of government measures in this regard include the establishment of the Committee of Women's Rights Promotion by the Cabinet to introduce the concept of gender mainstreaming to Taiwan, as well as the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Taking effect in 1981, CEDAW is an important code for protecting women's rights. Although the ROC is not a United Nations member, the country is committed to the convention and passed the Enforcement Act of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in May 2011, with the legislation coming into force on January 1, 2012.

Efforts to promote gender equality can also be seen in traditional customs such as the annual Confucius Ceremony that takes place on September 28. In ancient times females were forbidden to participate in the event. Now they can play various roles in the ritual, including the principal presentation officer. After regulatory amendments by the Ministry of the Interior in 2009, women can also





















A former teacher and student affairs director at high schools, the politician has held major positions in the ruling Kuomintang such as central committee deputy director-general. She has been a lawmaker for eight consecutive terms since 1990 when legislators started to be elected in Taiwan. For her present eighth term in the Legislative Yuan, she holds an at-large seat and is the lawmaking body's first female vice president.







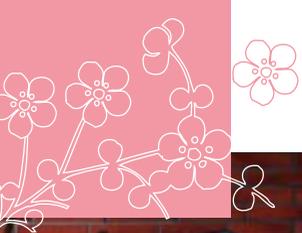












## New Women in Town

**H**ailing from Cambodia, Lin Li-chan married an ROC national and came to Taiwan in 1997. Encouraged by her family, she studied beauty science while volunteering for community services and helping new immigrants better adapt to the local environment. In 2013, Lin won an award as one of Taiwan's Ten Outstanding Young Persons, making her the first new immigrant to be accorded the honor.

Lin is just one of many immigrants who call Taiwan home. Arelis Gabot, from the Dominican Republic, married into a Hakka family. Braving the challenge of cultural differences and learning new languages, she now speaks Mandarin, Taiwanese and Hakka, and is a great cook of the local cuisine. In 2011, she became the first naturalized ROC citizen to hold the position of borough chief—a local-level public office—serving about 100 households.

Another success story is Vietnamese-born Nguyen Kim Hong, who came to Taiwan in 2000. She learned filmmaking from her husband, a documentary director, and was chosen to take part in The Wanderers' Project established by Lin Hwai-min, founder of the world-renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan. Chronicling the lives of Vietnamese women in Taiwan with her lens, she is the first female new immigrant turned film director.

Over the past two decades, new immigrants like Li, Gabot, Nguyen and many others from Southeast Asian nations and mainland China came to Taiwan due partly to a gradually easing immigration policy. An increasing number of people have settled here through marriage and work.

Cross-strait people-to-people exchanges have increased since the late 1980s, and Taiwan businesspeople started investing in Southeast

Asian nations in the 1990s. All this has given rise to more contacts among people in the region while at the same time more men in Taiwan are marrying out.

These new immigrants now account for about 2.1 percent of Taiwan's total population, almost on par with the indigenous peoples at 2.29 percent. According to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), as of August 2014, about 494,996 people moved to Taiwan as a result of marriage. Of this figure, 93 percent are women, with 60 percent coming from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau, 18 percent from Vietnam, 5.7 percent from Indonesia, 1.7 percent from Thailand, 1.6 percent from the Philippines and 1 percent from Cambodia.

Foreign spouses are faced with many challenges such as trying to adapt to their new society, raising children, and helping provide for their families. This can be a daunting task even for spouses from mainland China, who also speak Mandarin, let alone for people from completely different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

To better help these new immigrants deal with such challenges, the MOI set up a care fund of US\$100 million for foreign spouses in 2005, spanning 10 years. In 2012, the government began providing capacity-building scholarships for new immigrants

and their children. In any elementary school where the number of new immigrants' children exceeds 100 or is about 10 percent of the total students, the school organizes home visits, reading sessions for parents and children, and extra language classes for the students to learn their parents' native languages. In addition to educational assistance, the government offers these new residents practical information and consultations to help them ease into life in their adopted home.

Today, one in seven is born into an immigrant family. The first and second generations of new immigrants account for about 700,000 people. By 2030, nearly 13.5 percent of the population aged 25 will be second-generation immigrants. They will constitute an emerging demographic and social force that must be reckoned with. These newcomers and their descendants are a bridge to enhanced relations between Taiwan and its Southeast Asian neighbors. It is important to help them prosper and take root in Taiwan.

The government has made great efforts to assist new immigrant families, providing various support for foreign spouses and making sure their own cultures are respected. An already multifaceted Taiwan society is learning from the cultures these immigrants bring and, in the process, has grown to be even more tolerant, understanding and empathetic. ■