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## Engineering a better future for minorities

Phyllis Cheung's work on water projects in the developing world led her to join **Unison** and fight to help Hong Kong's 'forgotten' people

Choosing a career in hydraulic engineering doesn't usually lead to a job advocating for the rights of ethnic minorities – but that's exactly the route that brought Phyllis Cheung Fung-mei to her new role.

Cheung, 48, is the new executive director of **Unison**, one of the few local non-governmental organisations fighting for the rights of minority groups. And she credits her training in hydraulic engineering with setting her on the path to the position.

Her engineering years were spent travelling the globe to build water-related projects in developing countries, before she headed back to her hometown of Hong Kong to fight for some of the city's forgotten people.

Cheung, who took up her new job in September, is friendly and unassuming when answering questions – and a little uncomfortable having her picture taken, saying: "I don't really like being photographed."

But the soft-spoken mother of two spares no censure as she delivers harsh criticism of Hong Kong's retrograde human rights situation and social policies.

"Hong Kong is only up to a developing country's standard, especially in social policies. In a developed country, the government would listen to the people's thoughts and cater to people's needs using the taxes they collect. Here, it's not the case."

And she sees no difference between wealthy Hong Kong's policies towards the poor and marginalised, and those of the developing countries she worked in.

Developing countries often experience rampant corruption and offer little support for those in most need, she said. Hong Kong may fare better in most aspects, but it lags behind in caring for its poorer citizens.

Not enough is being done for the needy and underprivileged, including the ethnic minority groups whom, she says, "are some of the most forgotten people in Hong Kong".

"Such a wide wealth gap only happens in countries with problematic governance," she says of Hong Kong's inequality.

Cheung does not believe in a welfare state – where heavy social spending puts government finances under strain – but argues that strong social policies will develop in a good society.

Having social policies does not create a welfare state automatically, she says, adding that resources should be allocated to those who need them.

And Cheung, who has also worked for Oxfam and the Red Cross in Hong Kong, is undaunted by the challenge ahead.

“I bring with me a broad world view, as well as an understanding of, and appreciation for, different cultures. I think these are necessary qualities in dealing with racial equality issues,” she says. “I’ve always preferred work which is related to people. This may be new in some ways, but I believe I come with a wealth of experience in different cultures.”

Cheung started working with NGOs overseas in 2005 after studying for a master’s in engineering in Canada. She spoke of her passion for people living in developing countries and how her work in Eritrea, Uganda and Indonesia – where she often worked for six months or more – taught her to respect local wisdom and culture.

“There are no stupid or lazy cultures,” she says. “Going out [to different countries] taught me I needed to stay open and accept their culture ... to respect local wisdom.”

Cheung firmly believes that Hong Kong’s minorities do not need handouts, but rather understanding and a helping hand to sustain themselves in a predominantly Chinese society.

“The emphasis in the near future here at *Unison* will still be on education,” she says. In September, the government finally set out a framework for the teaching of Chinese as a second language in public schools. *Unison* and other NGOs had long advocated second-language teaching as a way to help minority children integrate into society and improve their career prospects. But Cheung says nothing is in place to monitor progress and keep schools accountable. “It’s only a framework – it’s incomplete.”

And Cheung’s personal experiences have given her a taste of life as an immigrant.

She moved to Canada with her family while in secondary school, settling in Toronto and later studying for her bachelor’s degree in Montreal before coming back to Hong Kong to work in event planning for three years.

Studying in French-speaking Quebec gave Cheung a taste of being an outsider, and of linguistic frustration.

“Language was a huge issue ... race discrimination was not big, but language discrimination was,” she says. “Like the ethnic minority groups here, I struggled with learning French. Because my French was only enough for a conversation in the market, I couldn’t find any jobs in Montreal after graduation.”

The situation in Hong Kong is exceptionally bad, with people whose families have been in Hong Kong for generations still unable to integrate. Cheung is calling on the government to do more not just policy-wise, but in terms of public education and awareness as well, to make Hong Kong a truly international city.

On whether she regrets leaving her family in Canada to return to Hong Kong alone, she says she always wanted to come back.

“I stayed until secondary school, so I had this attachment to Hong Kong,” she said. “I think I’m ready to settle back here and do this work.”

PHYLLIS CHEUNG

- 1984: Emigrates to Canada with family
- 1990: Graduates in Montreal and returns to Hong Kong
- 1993: Leaves for Canada to start a family
- 1994: First son born
- 1996: Second son born
- 2003: Starts master's degree
- 2005: Starts working for NGOs
- 2007: Goes to Eritrea for nine months, on a water-related project
- 2008: Returns to Hong Kong to work for Red Cross
- 2011: Returns to Canada
- 2013: Joins Oxfam in Hong Kong
- 2014: Takes over at *Unison*

# ENGINEERING A BETTER FUTURE FOR MINORITIES

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Jennifer Ngo  
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