

For information

**LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES**  
**Empowerment of Women**

**PURPOSE**

This paper follows up the views expressed by community groups at the meeting of the LegCo Panel on Welfare Services (Welfare Panel) held on 13 April 2004.

**BACKGROUND**

2. At the Welfare Panel meeting held on 13 April 2004, in considering the Administration's submission on "Empowerment of Women", Members noted the views of representatives from 11 groups about various difficulties faced by women in Hong Kong. Members requested the Administration to take up the concerns raised by representatives and to provide a paper to the Panel before the end of the current LegCo session.

**MAIN CONCERNS RAISED BY COMMUNITY GROUPS**

3. The main concerns raised by representatives of the community groups are summarised at the Annex.

**RESPONSE OF THE ADMINISTRATION**

4. Despite the efforts made in education, employment, training, health, welfare services and other fields, the Administration recognises that there are still some hurdles hindering the full development of women's potential and their participation in society. Working women often have to shoulder double pressure of work and taking care of their families. Unemployed women,

especially those middle-aged with low education qualifications, similar to their male counterparts, face difficulties in finding jobs and upgrading their skills. There are also women in vulnerable positions who need assistance to help themselves. The increasing incidents of domestic violence need to be seriously addressed. The level of participation of women, particularly grassroot women, in advisory and statutory bodies should be enhanced.

5. There are also gender stereotyping and misconceptions about the ability and role of women and men in the family, in the workplace and in society. The increasing trend towards globalisation, the rapid development of technology and the economic restructuring of Hong Kong have brought further challenges and opportunities for women as well as society as a whole.

6. The Government is keenly aware of these issues and is making every effort to address them. To enable women in Hong Kong to meet the challenges, a tailor-made strategy to empower women needs to be worked out. The Women's Commission has rightly recognised that empowerment involves two levels, viz. capacity building for women at the individual level, and the creation of an enabling environment in society for women to develop their potential.

7. To build an enabling environment for women's development, the society needs to be sensitive to their needs and concerns. As Government policies and programmes have a significant impact on women's well-being, we realise the importance of taking into account women's needs and perspectives in the formulation and review of policies, programmes and legislation. Such awareness and sensitivity should be carried through the stages of implementation and evaluation as well. The Women's Commission has already developed an analytical tool for gender mainstreaming in the form of a checklist. It has been pilot tested in several policy areas and is being introduced into different areas incrementally. Gender-related training programmes are being offered to civil servants to raise their awareness, and a training kit is being developed for wider use. A directorate level officer has now been designated in every bureau and department to help promote gender mainstreaming in his / her organisation. An evaluation mechanism is being developed, and comments and suggestions from academia and non-governmental organisations would be welcome.

8. As regards capacity building for women at the individual level, the Women's Commission has launched a Capacity Building Mileage Programme (CBMP) in partnership with the Open University of Hong Kong, Commercial Radio Hong Kong and over 60 non-governmental organisations. The CBMP is a large scale, flexible learning programme aimed at encouraging and facilitating women to pursue continuous learning and to enhance their all round abilities and life skills so that they could be better equipped to face life's challenges and develop their potentials more fully. The Women's Commission is working closely with the collaborative parties to improve the arrangements of the CBMP in the light of the views expressed by the community groups at the earlier Panel meeting and through other channels.

9. The Government's and the Women's Commission's efforts in promoting gender mainstreaming and empowering women will not be effective without tackling society's preconceived notions, roles, and stereotypes of women, which cause stress to women and also restrict the full development of women's potential. To address the problem, we have launched a large scale media publicity programme including TV drama series, radio talk shows and APIs to raise public awareness of gender-related issues and to reduce gender stereotyping.

10. There are, however, limitations on what public education activities could achieve. We are socialised in gender norms from a young age. Those on women's roles, in particular, are formed, maintained and reinforced through media messages and sometimes even by women themselves. Concerted endeavours by parents, families, schools and all sectors of the society are required in order to eliminate gender prejudices.

11. Regarding the suggestion of increasing women's participation in advisory and statutory bodies (ASBs), the Administration will step up efforts to reach out, identify and cultivate women who are willing and able to contribute to the work of these bodies. For ASBs concerned with district affairs or community services, conscientious efforts are being made to recruit more women into those bodies. On Area Committees, for instance, women membership has now risen to 24.5% of total membership. Many of these women members were from the grassroot level. Continuous efforts will be made to enhance women's participation on these and other ASBs.

12. Concerns have been expressed over wages for non-skilled workers, many of whom are women. To improve their livelihood, the long term solution is to enhance their employability and earning power. For women who wish to upgrade their skills and education, there are various subsidised education opportunities, such as the modular courses provided by non-governmental organisations under the Adult Education Subvention Scheme; skills training for 20 industries under the Skills Upgrading Scheme; subsidies under the Continuing Education Fund; retraining courses under the Employees Retraining Board as well as reimbursement of tuition fee for eligible students pursuing the Project Yi Jin, which is a bridging programme for secondary school leavers and adult learners.

13. In addition, the Administration will extend temporary jobs in a wide range of public services and will implement special employment programmes to help low-skilled workers.

14. Some community groups have advocated the setting up of women co-operatives as a means of economic empowerment of women. Some of them have indeed assisted and mobilised women to form co-operatives. On the Government side, the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund has provided seed money for a number of projects for building up social capital, which have, in certain cases, facilitated the formation of co-operatives. The Administration stands ready to consider how to facilitate further the sustainability of co-operatives as appropriate. The Women's Commission, too, is interested in the co-operative idea and would welcome an opportunity to exchange views with interested groups to explore this further.

15. In combating domestic violence, both the Administration and the Women's Commission have adopted a stance of 'zero tolerance'. The Administration has strengthened multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration to improve support for victims and their family. This includes updating procedural guidelines, improving training to professionals, and raising gender sensitivity of staff, etc. Furthermore, a research on child abuse and spouse battering has been commissioned to look into the prevalence rate and elements contributing to effective prevention and intervention of domestic violence cases. The research study will also develop assessment tools for

early identification of child abuse and battered spouse cases. As suggested by some community groups, the Administration is reviewing the Domestic Violence Ordinance to identify possible improvements to the legislation, taking into account the views expressed by these groups and pending the recommendations of the consultant conducting the research study. The Women's Commission is also looking into further areas of collaboration with different sectors to promote gender sensitivity, social cohesion and mutual help in tackling domestic violence and other problems faced by women.

16. Some women groups have also expressed concerns about access for women with disabilities to public facilities, such as public health clinics. The Administration is revising the Building Regulations and design manual to enhance access requirements in buildings to meet the needs of people with disabilities. In particular, the Department of Health will consider stepping up training for frontline staff to help women with disabilities in using Maternal and Child Health Centres and Woman Health Centres.

17. Last but not least, we wish to reiterate the importance of partnership and collaboration. A lot of work has already been done by various parties, but more remains to be done. Women's groups, non-governmental organisations, Government, academia and community groups must join hands in advancing the interests and well-being of women. This would create synergy, bring more benefits to women and make a much greater impact on society. The Women's Commission has developed a framework of collaboration with interested parties for such purposes, and looks forward to working with the latter on various projects and issues in the future. The Commission will maintain a close dialogue with women's groups and interested parties through regular visits, open fora, exchange sessions on specific topics and various activities. As suggested by some women's groups, the Commission would also play the role of an information hub on women services and issues. A directory of services provided by various organisations is now being uploaded to the Commission's website. The Commission will further develop its website to provide more information about women and to facilitate interactive exchanges among women.

**ADVICE SOUGHT**

18. Members are invited to note the contents of this paper.

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Health, Welfare and Food Bureau  
13 July 2004

**Summary of Main Concerns Raised by Community Groups  
at the Welfare Panel Meeting on 13 April 2004**

**A. Employment**

- (a) middle-aged and grassroot women experience difficulties in getting employment due to age and sex discrimination as well as homecaring responsibilities;
- (b) lack of minimum wage protection, casualisation of labour, long working hours and lack of retirement and employment protection; and
- (c) lack of retirement protection for homemakers.

**B. Business**

- (a) difficulties in achieving empowerment through setting up of women co-operatives due to intense competition from large organisations, difficulties in accessing capital and financing, and outdated legislation on co-operatives and insufficient Government support.

**C. Education**

- (a) need to strengthen adult education, IT training, vocation training and retraining opportunities for women; and
- (b) time of classes, location of training centres and costs of training courses are barriers to women especially homemakers and grassroot women in pursuing continuous education.

#### **D. Welfare support**

- (a) insufficient support for new arrivals (e.g. new arrival with less than 7 years of residency are not eligible for social security benefits); and
- (b) need to review legislation and step up enforcement to reduce domestic violence.

#### **E. Social participation**

- (a) current system of appointment to advisory and statutory bodies often favours women in the business sector or middle class women; and
- (b) need to encourage and facilitate more grassroots women to participate in the policy formulation process.

#### **F. Support for women with disabilities**

- (a) need to improve access for women with disabilities to public services (e.g. clinics) and need to enhance sensitivity among frontline staff about the needs of women with disabilities; and
- (b) need to integrate women with disabilities in mainstream education.

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