

Legislative Council Subcommittee on Poverty

Women in Poverty

Introduction

This paper briefs Members on the poverty statistics relevant to women and the Government's support for women to become self-reliant.

Poverty Statistics in relation to Women

2. According to the 2012 poverty statistics, after taking into account government recurrent cash intervention, there were 403 000 households in Hong Kong living below the poverty line, involving 541 900 female persons and 476 000 male persons.¹ The female poverty rate² was 15.7%, while the male poverty rate³ was 14.7%.

3. In general, fewer poor females were engaged in work. In 2012, compared with the poor males in the same age group, poor females aged between 18 and 64 had the following characteristics –

- (a) they had a lower labour force participation rate (LFPR) of 27.2%; the corresponding figure for males was 58.1%;
- (b) the economically active females were less engaged in full-time employment. 54.3% of the poor female labour force were engaged in full-time jobs, compared with 68.5% of their male counterparts;
- (c) many more of them were home-makers. 45.1% (130 200 persons)

¹ All these figures exclude foreign domestic helpers.

² The female poverty rate refers to the number of females living in poor domestic households as a percentage of total females living in domestic households (excluding foreign domestic helpers).

³ The male poverty rate refers to the number of males living in poor domestic households as a percentage of total males living in domestic households (excluding foreign domestic helpers).

of poor females were home-makers, compared with 2.6% (5 800 persons) of poor males; and

- (d) within the poor population, most single parents were female. Amongst poor single parents, 23 800 (84.8%) were single mothers and 4 300 (15.2%) were single fathers.

Support provided by the Government

4. Our poverty alleviation policy is to encourage young people and adults to become self-reliant through employment, while putting in place a reasonable and sustainable social security and welfare system to help those who cannot provide for themselves. Over the years, the Government has been taking forward and improving a range of measures to help and encourage women get employed and become self-reliant, while in parallel we have been continuing to invest in education and create job opportunities. In addition to strengthening employment services as well as training and re-training, we have also been improving child care and after-school care services and promoting family-friendly employment practices so as to help release women to join the workforce. Suitable financial assistance will also be provided to encourage employment.

Education

5. Opportunities to education are important in empowering and enabling women to participate fully in society in different aspects. With social advancement in Hong Kong, the overall education attainment of both women and men improved markedly. However, women may appear to have a lower level of educational attainment than men, probably because the figures included older generation women who generally had a lower chance of receiving education when they were young. Today, the Government ensures that both male and female have equal chance to education at all levels. We provide young people, men and women, 12 years of free education. More than 76.5% of female aged 15 or above have attained secondary education or above; and more than half of our student enrolments in undergraduate programmes as well as over 60% of the students in taught postgraduates programmes are female.

Employment

6. We note that many women take on for themselves the role of carers in the family, and we fully respect the choice of women. However, we note that a considerable number of female homemakers would be willing to work given suitable employment opportunities while Hong Kong is projected to require more manpower to drive our economic growth. In Hong Kong, women enjoy the same rights as men to participate in the labour force and in choosing jobs. Those rights, as well as the equal access to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training, and access to any other benefits, facilities or services in employment are protected and ensured by the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO). The SDO also prohibits discrimination against women on the ground of sex, pregnancy and marital status, while the Employment Ordinance provides protection against dismissal during pregnancy and for maternity leave. The Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance (OSHO) and its subsidiary legislation seek to ensure the safety and health of employees, men and women, when they are at work, and pregnancy is specified as one of the factors to be considered in the risk assessment exercise in relation to manual handling operations. Both the OSHO and the Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance stipulate that an employer has a general duty to ensure safety and health of his/her employees at work and the same standard of protection is provided for male and female employees.

7. The median monthly employment earnings of women in 2012 was \$11,000, when compared with \$14,000 for men. As at the third quarter of 2014, the figures were increased to \$12,300 and \$15,000 respectively. We will continue to implement the statutory minimum wage, to provide a wage floor to forestall excessively low wages for men and women. This measure has proven to be effective in encouraging more women to employment.

8. The Labour Department (LD) provides comprehensive and free employment services for job seekers, including women, through a network of 13 job centres, two industry-based recruitment centres, a telephone employment service hotline, an interactive employment service website, and numerous vacancy search terminals installed at various locations in the territory.

9. LD's job centres are equipped with various facilities to enable job

seekers to complete the whole job hunting process in one stop. Job seekers may make direct applications to employers for job interviews, or obtain job referrals through officers of the job centre or by calling the telephone employment service hotline. Personalised employment advisory services are made available to job seekers, including women, at job centres, so that they can meet the employment officers to obtain the latest information on the labour market and training/retraining courses, job search advice, and/or have the career aptitude assessment as appropriate.

10. LD administers various employment programmes to encourage employers to provide work trial opportunities and on-the-job training to job seekers with employment difficulties through the provision of financial incentives. Eligible job seekers, including women, can join these employment programmes to enhance their employability.

11. Moreover, to enhance the dissemination of vacancy information to job seekers, LD regularly organises large-scale and district-based job fairs. Two recruitment centres have been set up for the catering and retail industries to provide convenient platforms for employers in the industries to stage their recruitment activities. Job seekers, including women, can submit job applications and attend interviews with employers on the spot to speed up the job search process.

12. Since January 2013, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been implementing the Integrated Employment Assistance Programme for Self-reliance (IEAPS). It provides one-stop, integrated employment assistance services on family basis to encourage and assist unemployed able-bodied Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients aged 15 to 59 as well as single parents and child carers on CSSA with their youngest child aged 12 to 14 to overcome work barriers, enhance their employability and seek paid employment to become self-reliant. In particular, the New Dawn Project Services therein provide personalised employment assistance and other support services to employable single parents and child carers to help them prepare for seeking part-time paid employment while being able to take care of the family.

Training and Retraining Services

13. The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) adopts a “market-driven, employment-oriented” approach in developing its courses. Its service targets are eligible employees aged 15 or above with educational attainment at sub-degree level or below. Since its establishment in 1992, ERB has offered an array of training courses to over 840 000 local employees and about 70% of them were female.

14. At present, ERB offers about 800 courses straddling 28 industry categories through its territory-wide network of about 410 training centres operated by over 110 training bodies. The courses include full-time placement-tied courses targeting the unemployed or non-engaged people, as well as half-day or evening non-placement-tied courses catering for the needs of serving employees or people planning for a career change. Placement-tied courses are free of charge. Trainees attending placement-tied courses with duration of 7 days or more may apply for a retraining allowance. On completion of courses, trainees are provided with placement follow-up services of 3 to 6 months by the training bodies. ERB also provides non-placement-tied courses which cover Skills Upgrading Scheme Plus courses and generic skills training courses (including workplace languages, business numeracy and IT applications, etc). These courses are fee-charging. Trainees who have no or low income may apply to waive the course fee in full or in part.⁴ In recent years, courses that are more popular among female trainees are those related to domestic services, beauty therapy and healthcare services, etc, and about 96% of trainees of these courses are female. In 2013-14, 82% of female students who had completed ERB placement-tied courses were employed.

15. Single parents fulfilling the entry requirements may apply for admission to ERB training courses according to their employment aspirations and training needs. Applications for ERB training courses from single parents with children aged below 18 are accorded with priority.

Child Care and After-school Care Services

⁴ Trainees with monthly income of \$9,000 or below may apply for course fee waiver. Trainees with monthly income between \$9,001 and \$19,500 may apply for payment of subsidised fee (approximately 30% of the training costs).

Child Care Services

16. SWD has all along been providing subsidies to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to run a diversified and flexible range of child care services to render assistance to parents in their temporary unavailability for child care because of work or other social reasons.

17. To address community demand for child care services, SWD will increase the number of places in aided standalone child care centres (CCCs) in Hong Kong from 690 at present to 730 in the second half of 2014-15. Moreover, SWD enhanced the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP) in October 2014 by lifting the age limit of service beneficiaries from below the age of 6 to below the age of 9; providing at least 234 additional places for the home-based child care service, bringing the total number of places from at least 720 to at least 954; and providing additional funding for service operators to enhance social work support for the service. Higher funding allocation will be provided for operators having exercised their flexibility to increase home-based child care places on top of the minimum requirement set by SWD to meet the actual district demand.

After School Care Programme

18. SWD provides After School Care Programme (ASCP) through NGOs on a self-financing and fee-charging basis, offering half-day support services for children aged six to 12. As at October 2014, there are 149 ASCP centres operated by NGOs offering about 5 400 places across the territory. Through the Fee Waiving Subsidy Scheme, SWD provides fee-waiving and fee-reduction for children using the ASCP service, thereby facilitating parents of low-income families to attend work or vocational training and strengthening their self-reliance.

19. To improve ASCP, SWD will, from 2014-15, allocate additional resources to extend the service hours on weekday evenings, weekends and school holidays in some ASCP centres and provide additional fee-waiving and fee-reduction quotas. This could strengthen support for those parents working longer, irregular hours on weekdays and/or at weekends and those intending to join the workforce.

20. To further encourage the business sector and organisations to work with schools to facilitate the whole-person development of students mainly from grassroots families, the Government will earmark another \$200 million on top of the original funding of \$200 million for the Partnership Fund for the Disadvantaged (PFD). The additional funding will be provided on a matching fund basis through PFD, and will be dedicated to launching more after-school learning and support programmes for primary and secondary school students from grassroots families.

Family-friendly Employment Policies and Practices

21. The Government has all along been dedicated to encouraging employers to adopt “employee-oriented” good management measures and to implement family-friendly employment practices (FFEP) with a view to helping employees balance their roles and responsibilities in work and family. The Employment Ordinance already provides for various kinds of rights and leaves so that employees of both sexes can cater for their personal and family needs. Early this year we introduced into the Legislative Council a Bill to amend the Employment Ordinance so as to provide eligible working fathers with three days’ paid paternity leave. We hope that this Bill can be passed by the Legislative Council soon.

22. We encourage employers to grant their employees benefits that exceed the statutory requirements and provide them with flexible and varied work arrangements and support, e.g. implementing five-day work week, flexitime, home office or remote work and job sharing; granting compassionate leave and special casual leave, and providing child care services and counselling services on stress or emotional management to employees etc.

23. LD has been acting as one of the facilitators in encouraging employers to adopt different types of FFEP, having regard to the company size, resources and culture as well as employees’ needs, to serve the best interests of their enterprises and employees. Relevant information is disseminated to the community through a wide range of publicity channels and various educational and promotional activities such as publications, large-scale seminars, thematic exhibitions, promotional video, newspaper supplements, feature articles, advertisements in periodical journals of major employers’ associations and in public transport network as well as regular

meetings and exchanges with business executives and human resources managers.

24. The increasing recognition of FFEP by the community could be illustrated by the overwhelming response to the “Family-Friendly Employers Award Scheme” organised by the Family Council with the support of the Home Affairs Bureau. The biennial award scheme recognises companies and organisations that demonstrate a family-friendly spirit. In the “2013/14 Family-Friendly Employers Award Scheme”, some 1 800 companies and organisations have enrolled, representing an over 60% increase as compared to 2011.

25. The Government will continue to promote wider adoption of FFEP with a view to cultivating a family-friendly culture at work which will in turn facilitate women employment.

One-stop Information Platform for Women

26. To provide more comprehensive employment-related information to women, the Labour and Welfare Bureau and the Women’s Commission have developed the Women Employment Website. It aims to provide a one-stop information platform for women who wish to join the workforce and women already in employment to obtain information related to employment services, support services, as well as training and education programmes.

Low-income Working Family Allowance

27. As a new poverty alleviation initiative, the Low-income Working Family Allowance (LIFA) will be implemented 15 – 18 months after funding approval by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council. Its focuses are to alleviate the financial burden of the working poor families through encouraging employment and to provide appropriate support to promote upward mobility. LIFA will be tied to employment and working hours to encourage self-reliance, and specific measures will be introduced to meet the special needs of single parents. While the two-tiered working hour requirement for LIFA applicants is 144 and 192 hours per month, if the applicant is a single-parent, such two-tiered working hour threshold would be lowered to 36 and 72 hours per month. We estimate that over 204 000 low-income families (involving over 710 000 persons, including over

180 000 eligible children) could benefit from LIFA.

Advice Sought

28. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

**Labour and Welfare Bureau
Labour Department
Social Welfare Department
November 2014**