

立法會 *Legislative Council*

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Subcommittee on Poverty

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 27 November 2014

Women in Poverty

Purpose

This paper summarizes the discussions by the Council and the relevant committees relating to women in poverty.

Background

2. According to the Administration, the problem of women in poverty has many causes which cover a broad spectrum of areas like education and training, employment services and protection, social welfare support and services, etc. In the face of these problems, various policy bureaux and departments ("B/Ds") offer assistance under their respective purviews to people in need, including women with a low income. The relevant commissions, including the Commission on Poverty, the Equal Opportunities Commission ("EOC") and the Women's Commission ("WoC"), have all along been working closely with B/Ds and addressing the problems from diverse perspectives.

3. According to the "Women and Men in Hong Kong Key Statistics, 2014 Edition" published by the Census and Statistics Department, the labour force participation rate of women in 2013 (excluding foreign domestic helpers) was 50.6%, which was lower than 69.1% of men. The number of women who were economically inactive was nearly double that of men and 41% of women in this category were home-makers. While the median monthly employment earning in 2013 was \$13,000, there was a difference of \$4,500 between the earning of women (\$10,500) and that of men (\$15,000). Compared to men, a relatively higher proportion of employed women was engaged in clerical and elementary occupations which offered relatively lower monthly employment earnings. As regards the working population from the Mainland having

resided in Hong Kong for less than seven years, the median monthly income from main employment of women was \$7,000 in 2011, which was lower than that of \$9,000 for men.

Members' deliberations

4. At its meeting on 6 April 2005, the Council passed a motion on "Policy on assisting women in poverty" urging the Government to face up to the feminization of poverty and formulate concrete policies and measures in various policy areas to assist women in poverty. The various committees of the Legislative Council ("LegCo") have also studied relevant issues.

Study on Women in Poverty

5. In June 2006, the Subcommittee to Study the Subject of Combating Poverty ("SCSSCP") set up under the House Committee completed its study on women in poverty. In the course of the study, SCSSCP had gauged the views of non-governmental organizations ("NGOs") and EOC, and had held discussions with the relevant B/Ds on the situation of women in Hong Kong, causes of women in poverty, and measures to address the problems faced by women. SCSSCP had put forward 21 recommendations in the following seven major areas for consideration by the Administration:

- (i) providing support services to the disadvantaged women;
- (ii) providing financial assistance to women in poverty;
- (iii) enhancing the employability of women;
- (iv) protecting women against discrimination in employment;
- (v) gender mainstreaming and empowerment of women;
- (vi) enhancing social and economic participation of women; and
- (vii) providing retirement protection for women.

Special needs of the disadvantaged women

6. At a number of Council meetings, Members had expressed concern that disadvantaged women (including full-time women home-makers, women earning low incomes, women working part-time, women who had low educational attainment and low skills, as well as female single parents and new arrivals) tended to fall into poverty more easily. They wondered if the Administration had drawn up any policies to ease their hardship.

7. The Administration advised that it had taken measures to provide the needy (including the disadvantaged women) with support in areas of financial assistance, employment training, social welfare and child care. On financial

assistance, people who could not support themselves financially might apply for the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") to meet their basic living expenses. Single parents and family carers were provided with higher standard rates (ranging from \$1,875 to \$2,340), plus additional monthly supplement of \$300 for single parents. With effect from 17 December 2013, the residence requirement under the CSSA Scheme had been lowered from seven years to one year. Other Government assistance to the disadvantaged and poverty alleviation measures, such as the short-term food assistance service and the Living Allowance for Carers of the Elderly Persons from Low Income Families under the Community Care Fund, were also provided on a need basis irrespective of gender.

8. On employment training, the Labour Department administered a series of employment programmes which provided tailor-made support to individual job-seekers having regard to their actual needs. For single parents and child carers on CSSA with their youngest child aged 12 to 14, they could seek employment services through the New Dawn Project and the Integrated Employment Assistance Programme for Self-reliance under the Social Welfare Department ("SWD"). Moreover, the Employees Retraining Board ("ERB") provided diversified training courses and services of which many were suitable for and well received by women. For example, ERB offered full-time placement-tied courses targeted at the unemployed free of charge.

9. On welfare services, the Administration advised that the 65 Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSCs") and two Integrated Services Centres over the territory provided a spectrum of preventive, supportive and remedial services, including family life education, parent-child activities, enquiry service, volunteer training, outreaching service groups and programmes, intensive counselling, assessment for compassionate re-housing, financial assistance and referral services for people in need.

10. For those parents who were unable to take care of their children temporarily because of work or other reasons, SWD had all along provided subvention to NGOs to run a variety of child care services, including standalone child care centres ("CCCs"), CCCs attached to kindergartens, occasional child care service, extended hours child care service, mutual help CCCs and the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project ("NSCCP"), etc. To ensure that low-income families could afford the relevant services, SWD provided the needy families with different forms of fee waiver and subsidy.

11. Members considered that women often played a vital role in the family, such as taking care of elderly or disabled family members, but the retirement protection offered by the Mandatory Provident Fund Scheme did not cover women not in employment. Members were concerned whether the

Administration had formulated any specific plan or policy to provide livelihood protection for women at old age who were not in employment.

12. According to the Administration, elderly persons in financial difficulties, regardless of gender, could apply for financial assistance under CSSA and social security allowances, including the Old Age Allowance, Old Age Living Allowance and Disability Allowance. Moreover, the Administration provided a wide range of subsidized services for those in need such as public housing, medical services, education and social welfare services. Diversified services were also provided for the needy of different backgrounds through IFSCs and elderly centres in districts.

Women employment

13. Noting that providing employment assistance and enhancing competitiveness of the labour force were important strategies to tackle poverty, Members took the view that apart from providing employment services, the Administration should strengthen its child care and after-school care services so that grass-roots women who had young children could be unleashed from household matters to join the workforce. Members considered that the provision of child care services was far from adequate, and there was a mismatch between the provision of child care services and the service needs in some districts. In addition, the subvented child care services in remote areas should be enhanced by extending their service hours so as to enable residents in these districts to take up employment in other districts.

14. According to the Administration, there were still unused quotas for various child care services as at December 2013. That said, SWD would continue to closely monitor the service demand in this regard. Consideration would be given to adjusting resource allocation and increasing the provision of service places and relevant subsidy when the need arose. As a short-term measure, the Administration would consider examining the feasibility of in-situ service expansion in existing CCCs subject to the relevant requirements under the Child Care Services Ordinance (Cap.243). In the long run, the provision of child care services in specific districts would be drawn up having regard to the circumstantial changes, including demographic profile and service needs in different districts.

15. To provide child care services with greater flexibility, the Administration advised that from 2014-2015, NSCCP would be enhanced by lifting the age limit of service beneficiaries from under six to under nine, providing at least 234 additional places for home-based child care service and increasing funding to operators to enhance social work support for the service. Moreover, to enhance after-school care services currently provided by NGOs

for children aged six to 12, SWD would allocate additional resources to extend the service hours of some after-school care centres on weekday evenings, Saturdays, Sundays and school holidays, as well as to provide 360 additional fee-waiving and fee reduction quotas across the territory.

16. Noting that the Administration had all along encouraged employers to adopt Family-friendly Employment Practices ("FFEP"), Members enquired about the specific measures taken to foster a family-friendly culture in employment. Members also called on the Administration to develop more home-based job opportunities to facilitate women to work at home while undertaking household duties. The Administration advised that various B/Ds and the Family Council had strived to encourage employers to adopt employee-oriented management measures and implement FFEP. An increasing number of employers participating in the "Family-Friendly Employers Award Scheme" and "Caring Company Scheme", granting their employees benefits that exceeded the statutory requirements and providing their employees with flexible work arrangements had shown an increasing recognition of FFEP by employers. The Administration would continue to work in that direction.

17. According to the Administration, it had earmarked around \$30 million in 2014-2015 to promote women's interests and support the work of WoC. This included the provision for assisting WoC in implementing the Capacity Building Mileage Programme to support women's learning needs. The Labour and Welfare Bureau and WoC were conducting a survey to find out the reasons why Hong Kong women left the labour market and the factors that attracted them to take up employment again. The survey would be completed by end-2014 and the findings would serve as reference for policy formulation. A one-stop information web portal on services in support of women's employment would also be produced. WoC had set women's employment as the theme of its work in 2014-2015 and would provide funding support for women's groups and NGOs to organize projects that facilitate women's employment through the Funding Scheme for Women's Development.

Gender mainstreaming and gender equality

18. Members noted that WoC commissioned a consultant to conduct a questionnaire survey between February and May 2010, in which issues of women's status, role, division of work and development opportunity in the contexts of family, economic and social environments were covered. Members asked whether the Administration had assessed if the policy on elimination of the mindset of gender stereotyping was effective.

19. The Administration advised that the survey showed that while more could be done, some established gender stereotypes were gradually changing. For example, the shift in women's economic role was generally accepted in our society, and the traditional concept of men as the sole breadwinners of families had changed; more than half in the community considered that male supremacy no longer existed; and over 80% of the people agreed that women nowadays were independent and autonomous. The Administration would continue to work closely with WoC and EOC toward the goal of eliminating gender stereotyping.

20. In response to Members' concern about the proportion of women in advisory and statutory bodies ("ASBs"), the Administration advised that the gender benchmark target had been raised from 25% to 30% with effect from June 2010. Since then, the overall women's participation rate had been increasing. As at end-2013, 32.4% of the appointments to ASBs were taken up by female members. There were different reasons for ASBs failing to achieve the benchmark. For example, the majority of practitioners in the respective sectors or professions were male. The Administration would constantly monitor the progress and encourage further participation of women in ASBs, with a view to ensuring that views of both genders were adequately considered.

Relevant papers

21. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
24 November 2014

Appendix

Relevant papers on Women in Poverty

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	6 April 2005	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 94-161
Subcommittee to Study the Subject of Combating Poverty	18 May 2006 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes Report on Women in Poverty
Legislative Council	5 July 2006	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 122-190
Legislative Council	12 March 2008	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 65-68
Legislative Council	23 February 2011	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 108-111
Legislative Council	7 December 2011	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 102-122
Legislative Council	24 April 2013	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 96-106
Legislative Council	19 June 2013	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 133-157
Legislative Council	13 November 2013	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 9-23
Panel on Manpower and Panel on Welfare Services	9 December 2013 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Finance Committee	3 April 2014	Speaking notes of Secretary for Labour and Welfare at the Special Meeting of the Finance Committee for Examination of the 2014-2015 Draft Estimates

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Finance Committee	3 April 2014	<u>Administration's reply to members' written questions in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2014-2015 Pages 98-100</u>
Subcommittee on Poverty	7 July 2014 (Item I)	<u>Agenda Minutes</u>

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