

**LEGCO JOINT PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES
AND HOME AFFAIRS**

Empowerment of Women

PURPOSE

This paper informs members of the measures adopted by the Administration regarding empowerment of women in Hong Kong, and the initiatives and strategies of the Women's Commission in this area of work.

BACKGROUND

2. Empowerment of women aims to engage women as agents of change, eliminate barriers to women's full participation, and bring about the realisation of the due rights of women. Empowerment comprises processes at the individual and collective levels. At the individual level, empowerment involves capacity building for women and their self-actualisation. At the collective level, it involves the creation of an environment which facilitates women's advancement.

3. This paper examines the measures adopted by the Administration and the Women's Commission in empowering women in five key areas, namely, health, education, economic well-being, safety, and social and political participation.

MEASURES ADOPTED BY THE ADMINISTRATION FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Health

4. Women play a significant role in health promotion and caring for the family. They have a great influence on the health of their children, their family and the community. The Administration aims to promote the health of women and address their health needs at various stages of life through enhancing awareness and encouraging the practice of healthy lifestyle among women; educating women on the prevention of important health problems; and providing women with effective screening services. The Department of Health (DH) provides a wide range of health promotion (including health talks and workshops), disease prevention, screening and counselling services specially targeted at women through the Department's 10 Maternal and Child Cares (MCHCs) and 3 Women Health Centres (WHCs). A cervical screening programme has been launched in collaboration with other health care providers in March 2004, and breast awareness is being promoted. Mammography screening is also provided at WHCs for women aged 50 or above.

5. The maternal mortality ratio remained low over the last two decades. There was one maternal death registered in 2002, giving a maternal mortality ratio of 2.1 per 100 000 registered live births, which is among the lowest in the world. In 2003, the life expectancy of females is 84.3 years, which is among the longest by world standards. In respect of reproductive health, DH provides advice on family planning, pregnancy and childbirth issues through MCHCs. An antenatal shared care programme for expectant mothers is organised jointly by DH and the Hospital Authority (HA). Postnatal checks and health talks with promotion of breastfeeding are also conducted to facilitate effective child caring. Information on postnatal mood disorders is disseminated at MCHCs and women with postnatal depression or other mental conditions may be referred for specialist care as appropriate.

6. A range of activities and programmes are conducted in the MCHCs and WHCs and by the Central Health Education Unit of DH to enhance the mental health of women. Talks on "mental health" are conducted in General Out-Patient Clinics (now operated by HA) on an ongoing basis to enhance clients' ability to understand the source of stress and offer simple ways

of stress relief. For clients identified at risk, individual counselling will be provided and severe/persistent cases will be referred for specialist attention by psychiatrists (provided by HA) or clinical psychologists (by Social Welfare Department (SWD)).

Education

Adult education

7. Education is an important capacity building process that enables women to make informed choices for themselves. In addition to the nine-year universal and free education, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) organises evening adult education courses (primary and secondary level courses as well as English courses) through non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As at September 2003, there are 6 073 participants enrolled in these classes, of which about 60% were female. An Adult Education Subvention Scheme (AESS) is provided by EMB to learners in need, where about 78% of the beneficiaries were female.

IT education and promotion

8. There have been some concerns about a possible “digital divide” (i.e. the gap in the access to information technology (IT) and the use of Internet) among women. To bridge the digital divide, the Home Affairs Department (HAD) has been organising various IT promotion projects, with special target at women. These projects include the Super Cyber Centre Project, Community Cyber Point Project, Yuen Long Pok Oi District Cyber Centre Project and IT Awareness Programme in 18 Districts under the “IT Hong Kong” Campaign. Over 5 000 public computers with Internet connections are provided at convenient locations such as community centres/halls, public libraries, district offices and post offices for free use by the community. All these initiatives aim at providing free access to IT facilities in the community and basic IT training.

9. The Director of Home Affairs has set up a Central Co-ordination Committee for the Promotion of IT Usage among Women in early 2001, to co-ordinate efforts among Government and the NGO sectors in the promotion of wider use of IT among women. District Committees have also been set up

in the 18 districts with an aim to co-ordinate efforts and resources at district levels and to work with local organisations to enhance effectiveness of training and services provided to the public.

Parenting education

10. To relieve the stress of women in the caring of children, EMB encourages the setting up of parent-teacher associations (PTA) to serve as a bridge for parents to communicate and co-operate with schools and allow parents to effectively involve themselves in the course of education of their children. Reference materials on parenting education are also provided through PTAs. At present, PTAs are formed in all government schools and over 97% of aided schools. A “Family Volunteering Scheme” was introduced where parents are trained to be schools' voluntary work organisers to promote parental care and concerns over their children' s mental and physical development.

Economic Well-being

11. Gaining economic independence is also an important empowerment process that enables women to participate more fully in society. In the fourth quarter of 2003, 44% of the labour population were female. The median income of female workers was \$9,000 as compared with \$11,000 for male workers⁽¹⁾. There have been some concerns about women in poverty. There is no universally agreed and objective definition of poverty, which is subject to contextual variables of time, place, and prevailing conditions. As an indicator, as at end January 2004, about 272 000 or 51.8% of the 525 000 CSSA recipients were female.

Employment Service

12. The Labour Department (LD) provides a comprehensive range of free employment services to help job seekers, including women, find suitable job through its network of 11 job Centres, and the Telephone Employment Services. A more personalised service is available in its Job Matching Programme. A number of measures have been introduced in conjunction with the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) to help women job seekers looking for

⁽¹⁾ Foreign domestic helpers have been excluded from this calculation.

local domestic helper (LDH) posts, including a “Special Incentive Allowance Scheme for LDHs” to address geographical and time mismatches of the LDH market.

Age discrimination as a barrier to employment

13. There have been concerns about difficulties faced by middle-aged women in seeking employment, possibly due to age discrimination. The LD promotes equal opportunities in employment through publicity and public education efforts. Two booklets, “Practical Guidelines for Employers on Eliminating Age Discrimination in Employment” and “Eliminating Age Discrimination in Employment – A Simple Guide to Employers” are distributed in LD’s Job Centres, public libraries and District Offices of the HAD. A TV and radio Announcement of Public Interest, entitled “Count on Talent Not Age in Employment” has also been produced and disseminated through different media channels.

Vocational training and retraining

14. Vocational training and retraining programmes are provided by the Vocational Training Council (VTC) and the ERB for people who wish to enhance their own employability and upgrade their skills. In 2003/04, about 38% of the 54 000 trainees attending vocational training courses offered by the VTC were female, about 76% of the 730 000 trainees of the ERB were female. A Skills Upgrading Scheme (SUS) was introduced in 2001 to provide focused skills training in various industries for in-service workers. About 47% of the beneficiaries were female. Furthermore the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) was introduced in 2002 to help those aged between 18 and 60 to pursue continuing education, where 60% of the approved applications were from female applicants.

Childcare Support for Working Mothers

15. A wide range of child care services has been developed to meet the needs of parents and to enable them to take up employment. These include day nursery, day crèche and occasional child care centre services. Extended hour services are provided in some of these centres to meet the special needs of working parents who need longer hours of child care

assistance.

16. In addition, Mutual Help Child Care Centres (MHCCC) are also set up to provide flexible child care service at the neighbourhood level and facilitate the promotion of a mutual support spirit. In addition, to provide more flexible child care services to needy families, a 2-year pilot project on supervised child-minding service has been launched in Tung Chung since June 2003 with the support of the Lotteries Fund. The service aims at providing care services for children aged under 3 during daytime as a way to help working or needy parents to address their child care needs. Apart from helping parents with young children to rejoin the work force, the project also creates job opportunities for those who wish to become child-minders.

Social Security

17. The Government's social security policy is to meet the basic and special needs of disadvantaged people, including women in disadvantaged situation. This is achieved through a comprehensive social security system administered on an entirely non-contributory basis and wholly funded by general revenue. Under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme, single-parent families, most of which are headed by female, are entitled to monthly standard rates and special grants. They also receive a monthly single-parent supplement at \$225 in recognition of the special difficulties which single parents face in bringing up a family, irrespective of the age of the child. The monthly standard rate for single parents (\$1,745) is also higher than that for other able-bodied adults living in a family (\$1,430). To encourage single parent CSSA recipients gain employment and move towards self-reliance, these beneficiaries have to enrol in the Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme (introduced on 1 June 1999) as a condition of receiving CSSA when the youngest child in the family has reached the age of 15.

Old age protection

18. Old Age Allowance (OAA) and Disability Allowance (DA) are provided in the form of a monthly flat-rate allowance to elderly persons aged 65 or above and to persons who are severely disabled to meet special needs arising from old age or disability. As at end December, of the 457 000 beneficiaries receiving the OAA, about 56% were elderly women, and 51% of

107 000 DA recipients were female recipients.

Safety

19. Services are provided to protect women against domestic and sexual violence. For combating domestic violence, the Administration provides a variety of preventive, supportive and specialised services. These include public education, hotlines, childcare assistance, support/mutual help groups, counselling, clinical psychological service, crisis intervention, emergency outreaching, time-out facility, refuge centre etc. In addition, mechanisms at different levels are in place to facilitate cross-sector collaboration. A set of multi-disciplinary guidelines on spouse battering is available to ensure that frontline workers of different disciplines will handle battered spouse cases with a common understanding of the problem and good coordination.

20. The Working Group on Combating Violence (WGCV) is convened by the SWD and comprises representatives from different policy bureaux, departments and NGOs to map out strategies and approaches for the prevention and handling of spouse battering and sexual violence at the central level. Improvements that have been made include (a) enhancing the Central Information System on Battered Spouse in 2003 to include sexual violence cases and to collect more information on battered spouse cases; (b) enhancing the referral mechanism between the Police and SWD since January 2003, so that under certain conditions, the Police can refer family violence cases to SWD for intervention without the consent of the victims or abusers; and (c) launching a website in June 2003 to promote support services for victims of various nature including spouse battering and to facilitate access/sharing of information among related professionals.

Promoting Social Participation and Social Inclusion

Promoting Women's Participation in Advisory and Statutory Bodies (ASBs)

21. Advisory and statutory bodies have an important role to play in Hong Kong's public policy-making structure and decision-making process. The proportion of women on these bodies, however, has been on the low side. To facilitate women to participate more fully in the community and enhance

women's participation in decision making, the Administration has accepted Women's Commission's advice to take gender composition into account when making appointments. An initial working target of 25% has been introduced as a benchmark for women's participation. Bureaux and departments are requested to make more proactive efforts to reach out, identify and cultivate women who are able and willing to contribute to the work of ASBs. They are also requested to contribute data on potential women candidates to the Central Personality Index (CPI), from which nominations of candidates are often drawn. The Administration and the Women's Commission have also appealed to women's groups, professional bodies and chambers of commerce to encourage their women members to send their curriculum vitae to the CPI. When asked to nominate candidates for appointment, the Home Affairs Bureau will make an effort to ensure that at least 40% of the candidates are of either sex.

Services for New Arrivals

22. About 53 500 new arrivals from the Mainland settled in Hong Kong in 2003. Nearly 75% of them are female. It is Government's policy to facilitate early and smooth integration of new arrivals into the local community through services provided by various Government departments and NGOs. To ensure services provided by Government departments and NGOs are co-ordinated and could meet the needs of new arrivals, HAD has set up a Steering Committee on New Arrival Services, District Co-ordinating Committees, as well as a roundtable meeting for discussion and co-operation between Government and NGOs. Since 2001, a community education programme is organised every year to promote community acceptance of new arrivals and mutual understanding between new arrivals and local residents. Furthermore, HAD has been publishing a service handbook annually for new arrivals to provide the latest information on Hong Kong and the services provided for new arrivals. Since 1996, eight editions of this handbook have been published with a total distribution of over one million copies.

The Ending Exclusion Project

23. In order to provide more targeted assistance to help single parent CSSA recipients (who are mainly female recipients) with young children to become more self-reliant and integrated into society, the "Ending Exclusion Project" (EEP) was launched by SWD in March 2002. This project comprises

a voluntary employment assistance programme with focused and well co-ordinated services, including strengthened child care arrangements, family education, supportive programmes and outreaching services.

24. Some 2 000 CSSA single parent recipients were invited to join the Project initially. Priority was given to single mothers aged under 50 whose youngest child was aged 10 to 14; and single fathers aged under 50. The EEP has been well received by the participants generally and is endorsed by relevant parties, and EEP participants exhibited more job-seeking behaviour than before and subsequently secured more part-time employment. They became less isolated and improved in work involvement. They also learned to cope with their problems more rationally and their children acquired more positive perception of parent-child relationship.

Community Investment and Inclusion Fund

25 The Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) provides seed funding to support community-initiated projects to promote mutual aid and community participation, and encourage cross-sectoral solutions to address community needs. Women are amongst the key project organisers, volunteer contributors, as well as target participant groups in most of the projects supported by the CIIF. The projects have common elements such as empowerment through capacity building, development of neighbourhood-based mutual help networks, and experimentations with different co-operative models to increase social and economic participation as well as enhancing employment options.

INITIATIVES OF THE WOMEN'S COMMISSION IN EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

26. The Women's Commission was established in January 2001 as a central mechanism tasked to advise the Government on a long term vision and strategy to advance women's needs and concerns more effectively. The Commission has set its mission as: "To enable women to fully realise their due status, rights and opportunities in all aspects of life." To achieve this mission, the Women's Commission has adopted a three-pronged approach of gender mainstreaming, empowerment of women as well as public education. The

Commission is neither a funding body nor a provider of direct service to end users. It has played a strategic role in championing women's causes, inspiring and catalysing change and mobilising resources in the community.

Capacity Building Mileage Programme

27. Capacity building is an important empowerment process. An essential aspect of capacity building lies in the provision of relevant and accessible learning programmes. The Women's Commission has initiated a Capacity Building Mileage Programme (CBMP), which is a large-scale, flexible learning programme aimed at encouraging and facilitating women to pursue continuous learning, and is tailored to meet the needs and interests of women. The CBMP is developed by the Commission in partnership with the Open University of Hong Kong, the Commercial Radio and NGOs in the community.

28. The CBMP seeks to encourage active learning and facilitate the enhancement of all round abilities and life skills of women as individuals so that they could be better equipped to face life's challenges and develop their potentials more fully. The Programme promotes positive values and mindset. It aims at enhancing women's inner strength, self-reliance and self-confidence. The course contents are relevant to the daily life and interests of women, such as managing interpersonal relationships, financial management, health and practical issues in daily lives. Courses under the Programme are mainly delivered through radio broadcasting and supplemented by optional learning activities and some face-to-face courses organised with the help of women's groups and NGOs.

29. The CBMP allows participants to take up courses at any time and accumulate "points", which enable them to proceed to more advanced courses (hence, "mileage"); or exit the Programme at any time. Participants could accumulate points from their studies and advance to the next level of learning when sufficient "points" are accumulated. The Programme offers a new, convenient and accessible mode of learning for women, and indeed men also, from various backgrounds and education levels. The CBMP was launched on 8 March 2004. By 23 March 2004, over 1 000 enrolments have been registered and some 8 600 enquiries have been received.

Gender Mainstreaming

30. Gender mainstreaming refers to the incorporation of women's needs and perspectives in Government policy making, implementation and legislation. In this connection, an analytical tool in the form of a checklist (i.e. the Gender Mainstreaming Checklist) has been developed to help officials to carry out gender mainstreaming in their respective areas.

Gender Mainstreaming Checklist

31. The Checklist was pilot tested in five policy areas in 2002, and, based on feedback from the pilot test participants as well as other parties, refined in 2003. A set of accompanying guidance notes has been produced to familiarise officers with the concepts of gender mainstreaming and provide them with the necessary background information for performing gender sensitive analysis. In 2003, the Gender Mainstreaming Checklist was introduced into several more policy areas. Plans are in hand to roll out the Checklist to other areas incrementally.

Gender-related Training for Civil Servants

32. To enhance civil servants' understanding and awareness of gender-related issues, we have continued to provide training for civil servants. Over 600 civil servants of different grades have now participated in the training programme. The workshops have been organised in collaboration with a local tertiary institution. Contents include basic gender concepts, principles and practice of gender mainstreaming, collection and use of sex-disaggregated data as well as other materials tailored to meet the specific operational needs of participating officers. NGOs are involved in sharing their experience in some of the workshops.

Gender Focal Point Network

33. We have also taken action to set up a Gender Focal Point Network within the Administration. All bureaux and departments have already designated a directorate officer as "Gender Focal Point" within their organisation to act as liaison persons with the Women's Commission. They will assist in raising awareness and understanding of gender-related issues as

well as promoting gender mainstreaming initiatives in their respective organisations.

Public Education

34. To create an enabling environment for women to fully realise their potential, it is important to tackle society's preconceived notions, roles and stereotyping of women, which tend to restrict the opportunities and options for women and their development. The Women's Commission has initiated a series of public education activities and organised different seminars to promote greater gender sensitivity. This includes production of two series of Announcements in Public Interest on TV, radio and buses, two TV drama series on gender-related issues, a radio talk show, media advertorials, supplements and posters.

Other Empowerment Initiatives

35. To recognise and promote good practices adopted by NGOs in empowering women, a booklet on selected good practices was compiled and published in March 2003 to facilitate replication and adaptation of these programmes and activities by others. These practices covered different areas of concern to women, including education and training, economic well-being, self help and mutual help, social participation and decision-making, safety at home and in the public, as well as health.

36. To further encourage and promote such good empowerment practices, the Women's Commission organised a sharing session with NGOs in June 2003, at which representatives of NGOs, together with their beneficiaries, shared their experience and learning points of good empowerment practices. Around 200 persons of various NGOs, service agencies, community groups and government departments attended this forum and found it a very useful experience.

37. In addition, the Women's Commission has also organised an essay competition with a local newspaper on the theme of empowerment, initiated new service models that promotes mutual help among women, and inspired a NGO to develop a community health centre to promote health awareness among women in local community. The Commission also

organised a seminar with the then Education Department as well as NGOs to exchange experiences in parenting education.

38. In 2001, the Women's Commission invited the Census and Statistics Department to commission a thematic household survey on time use and pattern of participation in society. The survey looked into the average amount of time spent daily by different people on different activities, and their pattern of participation in various aspects of life such as housework, voluntary work, unpaid work for relatives and friends, cultural, recreational/sports and social activities, etc. The survey found that on the average women spent three times more than men on home caring work, voluntary work and unpaid activities for relatives and friends, and that women made significantly larger contribution to the caring of family members, relatives and friends.

39. There are some suggestions that the contribution by homemakers has not been duly recognised and valued. The Women's Commission holds the view that there is no universally accepted approach that could satisfactorily evaluate the monetary value of unpaid work performed by homemakers in caring for the family. While the survey revealed the contribution of women, in terms of time input, in their unpaid work of caring for family members, and such contribution should be duly recognised, it is felt that attaching a dollar value to such efforts is rather materialistic and is not totally in line with other values (such as the value of the family, family cohesion, care for others, etc), many of which could not be measured in material or monetary terms.

Collaboration with the Community

40. To enhance communication with the non-governmental sector, as well as to create synergy in the work of the Women's Commission and other bodies, the Administration and the Women's Commission are working to establish partnership with NGOs through its various activities. A framework of collaboration with NGOs and other interested parties has been developed for such purposes.

Future Work of the Women's Commission

41. Having reviewed its work over the past three years, the Women's Commission will consolidate and build on the foundation it has laid. The Commission has adopted the theme of "Women's Participation and Commitment" for the next two years. It will continue to advise the Administration in rolling out the Gender Mainstreaming Checklist to more policy areas, and in developing an evaluation mechanism to assess the effectiveness of the Checklist.

42. The Commission will continue to steer the implementation and further development of the CBMP to ensure continued improvement to the Programme. The Commission will enhance its efforts in collaborating with interested parties in the community to create synergy in promoting the interests and well-being of women in Hong Kong.

43. The Commission would also look into the possibility of promoting the setting up of women cooperatives as a means of economic empowerment of women. The relevant legislation, policies and practices may also be examined. The Commission will work in collaboration with the Administration and interested parties in the community in exploring this idea.

ADVICE SOUGHT

44. Members are invited to note the contents of the paper.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
30 March 2004

Annex

A copy of this document is kept at the Legislative Council Library.
Please contact the Legislative Council Library if you wish to refer to this document.