

**Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs
Meeting on 9 June 2006**

**Accomplishments of the Women's Commission in Promoting the
Well-being and Interests of Women in Hong Kong**

INTRODUCTION

The Women's Commission was established in 2001 as a high-level central mechanism to advise the Government on women's issues. Since its establishment, the Commission has made good progress in advancing the status of women in Hong Kong. This paper gives an overview of the accomplishments of the Commission in promoting the well-being and interests of women, as well as its efforts in advising and assisting the Government in the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Hong Kong.

BACKGROUND

2. During the hearing on the Initial Report of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) under the CEDAW, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (the CEDAW Committee) expressed concern on the absence of a governmental mechanism for the advancement of women in Hong Kong charged with the proactive development of policy and long-term strategies on gender equality. To demonstrate its commitment to further advance the well-being and interests of women in Hong Kong, the HKSAR Government set up the Women's Commission on 15 January 2001 as a high-level central mechanism to advise the Government on women's issues. Appointed by the Chief Executive of the HKSAR, the Commission is tasked to take a strategic overview over women issues, develop a long-term vision and strategy for the development and advancement of women, and advise the Government on policies and initiatives which are of concern to women. The Women's Division of the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, which has overall policy responsibility for women issues and oversees the implementation of CEDAW in Hong Kong, supports the work of the Commission. Sufficient recurrent funding has been made available annually to finance

the Commission's work.

3. The establishment of the Women's Commission is a key milestone to further advance the interests of women in Hong Kong. Chaired by a non-official and comprising another 17 non-official members and 4 ex-officio members, the Commission has a mission "To enable women in Hong Kong to fully realize their due status, rights and opportunities in all aspects of life". To achieve this mission, the Commission has adopted a three-pronged strategy, namely the provision of an enabling environment, empowerment of women through capacity building and public education. The Commission plays the strategic roles to champion women's causes, inspire and catalyse changes, and mobilize community resources. It also maintains close liaison and collaborates with local women groups in taking forward its initiatives, and actively participates in the international arena.

4. Over the past five years, with the collaborative efforts of the Commission and all sectors in the society, the Commission has made remarkable progress in advancing the status of women in Hong Kong. The major accomplishments of the Commission, as well as its efforts in assisting the Government in the implementation of the CEDAW are summarised in the ensuing paragraphs.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Provision of an Enabling Environment

Gender Mainstreaming

5. The Women's Commission sees gender mainstreaming as one of the key strategies in achieving women's advancement and gender equality. With the integration of gender perspective in legislation, policies and programmes, gender mainstreaming seeks to ensure that women and men have equitable access to, and benefit from, society's resources and opportunities.

6. The Commission has secured in 2002 endorsement of the Government to introduce gender mainstreaming into various policy areas on an incremental basis. To assist Government departments in considering gender perspectives in the policy formulation process, the Commission has developed an analytical tool in the form of a checklist (i.e. the Gender Mainstreaming Checklist), and a set of accompanying

guidance notes. The Commission has also assisted the Government in setting up a network of “Gender Focal Points” (in most cases, a directorate officer) from bureaux and departments who serve as the contact/resource persons for their respective organisations. A core group of Gender Focal Points has recently been set up to devise plans to further promote gender mainstreaming within their respective organisations. In addition, with the assistance of the Commission, the Government provides training to civil servants on a regular basis to enhance awareness of gender-related issues. Up to date, over 1,200 civil servants of various grades and ranks have received such training.

7. Since 2002, with the assistance and advice of the Women’s Commission, the Government has applied the Checklist to 19 policy areas or programmes within the Government. The Commission is encouraged that the Chief Executive has in his 2005-06 Policy Address reaffirmed the Government’s commitment to taking the needs and perspectives of the two genders into consideration when developing new policies and measures. To further promote the implementation of gender mainstreaming, the Commission issued a booklet in January 2006 to consolidate the application experience of the Government for sharing purposes. This is part of a review exercise by the Government under the advice of the Commission on the implementation of gender mainstreaming, results of which are expected to be available later this year.

8. In addition, the Women’s Commission and the Government jointly organised a seminar for Members of the Legislative Council in November 2005 to promote a wider understanding of the concept of gender mainstreaming. Prior to that, the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau also organised a similar seminar for all Principal Officials and Heads of Departments in the Government in September 2005. The Commission will continue to promote the application of gender mainstreaming within the Government on an incremental basis.

Review of Services for Women

9. Another major task of the Women’s Commission is to keep under review, in the light of women’s needs, services delivered within and outside the Government. Over the past years, it has reviewed key services for women, including health services, public housing, information technology training, employment services and job-related training, adult and continuous education, welfare services and family services, services for victims of domestic and sexual violence and

violence prevention programme, and has provided advice to the Government for improvement to cater for women's specific circumstances and needs.

Family Friendly Employment Policies and Practices in Hong Kong

10. In order to enable women to fully develop their potentials and to promote gender equality, the Women's Commission considers it crucial to provide opportunities for women to participate fully in the economy, decision-making, the community and all other aspects of life. In particular, the Commission believes that we should provide an enabling environment in which women, and men, can share out family responsibilities whilst at the same time achieve a better balance between work, family and life. To this end, the Women's Commission is conducting a fact-finding research in respect of family friendly employment policies and practices (FEPPs) jointly with the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). The objectives of the study are to review and investigate the needs, awareness, and prevalence of FEPPs in Hong Kong. It will also examine the expectations and benefits of FEPPs in our society. The Commission and EOC have appointed the Lingnan University to conduct the research, the results of which are expected to be available in mid 2006. The Commission will then consider the next step forward in the light of the research findings.

Empowerment of Women

Capacity Building Mileage Programme

11. Initiated by the Women's Commission, the Capacity Building Mileage Programme (CBMP) has been launched since March 2004 to encourage women of different backgrounds and educational levels to pursue life-long learning and self-development. It is the first large-scale tailor-made learning programme with a women focus. The Programme is implemented jointly by the Open University of Hong Kong and the Commercial Radio, and funded by the Lotteries Fund on a three-year pilot basis. Over 70 women's groups and non-governmental organisations also collaborate in offering supplementary learning activities and courses under the Programme. A Steering Committee is set up under the Women's Commission to provide steer on the implementation of the Programme.

12. The CBMP has been well received by women, as well as men.

As at March 2006, the accumulative number of enrolments is over 9,400, which has not included the large number of audience listening to the radio programme without formal registration. An audience rating survey had been conducted between April and July 2005 to estimate the audience size of the CBMP radio programme. Among the respondents interviewed, 26% had heard of CBMP and 5% had listened to the CBMP radio programme in the preceding year. Among the listeners, 43% were regular ones who tuned in at least once a week. Student feedback collected from different channels also indicate that they have significantly benefited from the courses in terms of increased interest in learning, and enhanced confidence and knowledge in solving daily difficulties.

13. The second graduation ceremony of CBMP was just held on 12 May 2006. Some 320 students were awarded with certificates and over 400 guests and relatives of the graduating students attended the ceremony. The ceremony was a heart-warming event in which we could witness the transformation in the students, suggesting that the CBMP has successfully achieved its objectives in empowering women through capacity building.

Women's Participation in Government Advisory and Statutory Bodies and at the Community Level

14. In respect of women's participation in decision-making, on the suggestion of the Women's Commission, the Government has set a gender benchmark of 25% as an initial working target for appointments to Advisory and Statutory Bodies (ASBs). Furthermore, all Government bureaux/departments have been asked to adopt a more proactive approach to reach out, identify and cultivate potential women candidates. With these efforts, women's participation in ASBs has been improving: from 21 % in December 2003 to 25.6% in February 2006.

15. The Commission is encouraged to see the attainment of the initial working target. But the Commission is cautious that this is an average figure and appointment of women in some of the ASBs is still below this average. It will continue to complement efforts of the Government in reaching out, identifying and cultivating potential female candidates. To this end, in 2006-07, the Commission plans to develop a women leaders network and organise activities to facilitate women's participation in decision-making at different levels.

Nurturing Caring Families

16. Harmonious families are the cornerstones of a harmonious society and building harmonious families has been a common issue of interests to all sectors in the community. In response to the needs and concerns expressed by many women groups, the Commission has put nurturing caring families as one of its work foci in the past year and has held a number of meetings with Government departments, experts and NGOs in the field of parenting education to identify gaps and areas that need to be further strengthened. The Commission is now taking forward two major initiatives to promote nurturing of caring families in the community and to empower women, and men, to become quality parents. One is a research on the core life values to be instilled in the younger generation in order for them to live a positive life. Preliminary findings of the study are expected to be available in mid 2006. In addition, the Commission is also exploring collaboration opportunity with community organisations to conduct a pilot project on quality parenting in a district. The idea is to establish a support network for parents to share experience and offer mutual help on parenting issues, with participation of different stakeholders in the district. It will also provide a platform to promote quality parenting education and to instil the core life values to children and youth.

Women's Safety

17. Women's safety has always been a priority area of the work of the Commission. Over the years, the Commission has reviewed the policies, services and legislation relating to domestic violence. It has also discussed with related Government bureaux and departments and made recommendations. In 2005, the Commission set up a dedicated Working Group to conduct an interactive and dynamic process with all stakeholders, where gaps in the existing systems were identified and pertinent questions and initiatives discussed. In the process, the Commission has met more than 50 organisations. It also calls on all sectors of the community to adopt a united stance on "zero tolerance" to domestic violence and make concerted efforts to combat the problem. .

18. In January 2006, the Commission released a report on the strategy and action plans entitled "Women's Safety in Hong Kong: Eliminating Domestic Violence", in which it has suggested a multi-dimensional strategy to eliminate domestic violence. Among others, the Commission promotes multi-disciplinary co-operation in tackling domestic violence, and advocates gender awareness, gender

equality and mutual respect and involving men in the process. The Commission also advocates policy, service and legal changes. It has put forward a total of 21 recommendations, covering law reform; services; publicity; professional knowledge-sharing, documentation and research; hospitals, health and medical sectors; gender mainstreaming and gender-related training; early identification and intervention; and community networking. The recommendations of the Commission have obtained the support of the Government, women groups, concerned stakeholders and others in the wider community. The Commission will continue to implement the multi-dimensional strategy in tackling domestic violence in partnership with the stakeholder groups and monitor progress.

Women's Health

19. Women's health is another important aspect of empowerment of women as improving women's general state of health would enable them to participate more fully in society. The Women's Commission has reviewed the public health services and health promotion programmes provided for women by the Department of Health. Among other things, the Commission considers it beneficial to women if the cervical cancer screening programme could be promoted to all women at large, in particular high-risk women. On the advice of the Commission, the Department of Health in collaboration with other health care professionals launched in 2004 a territory-wide cervical screening programme to provide affordable cervical smear test for participating women for better prevention of the disease. The Commission also maintains communication with the Government and the NGO sector for the promotion of further development of women's health clinics in the territory.

Public Education

20. The Women's Commission has launched public education and publicity programmes to reduce gender prejudice and stereotyping, as well as to raise public awareness of women-related issues. The following are some of the public education programmes launched by the Commission over these years:

- (a) Announcements in Public Interest (APIs) on TV, radio stations and on buses;
- (b) essay writing competition to stimulate public concern and

- interest on the theme of “capacity building”;
- (c) three series of TV drama series “Women with Dreams” on the theme of women capacity building and empowerment of women (two of these have won international awards);
- (d) radio programme on gender-related issues;
- (e) public fora and seminars on different specific women topics;
- (f) the Women’s Commission Conference 2002 with the theme on “Women for a Better Tomorrow”;
- (g) annual celebration of International Women’s Day;
- (h) orientation game design contest jointly organised by the Women’s Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission to promote gender awareness among university students; and
- (i) printing and distribution of posters.

21. Apart from the educational and publicity efforts targeted at the general public, the Commission also attaches importance to the promotion of gender awareness in school education. The Commission has maintained regular dialogue with the Education and Manpower Bureau and provide advice on the development of the curriculum from the gender perspective, in order to promote gender awareness and reduce gender stereotyping of students in their early stages of life and to make a sustainable impact. The Commission has also recommended that sufficient gender training should be provided to teachers to enhance their gender awareness.

22. The Commission is now producing two new APIs, including one on combating domestic violence and the other on nurturing caring families, which will be rolled out in mid 2006. It will also organise a Women’s Commission Conference in June this year with the theme on “Together We Build a Harmonious Community”. A pre-conference sharing session on men’s participation in families will also be held. This will help generate more discussion and arouse more awareness on gender issues among the public.

Work Conducted in Other Areas

Collaboration with Non-governmental Organisations

23. The Women’s Commission recognises and appreciates the important contribution that the non-governmental sector and women groups have made in advancing the interests of women in Hong Kong

throughout the years. To enhance communication with the non-governmental sector, as well as to create synergy with other bodies, the Commission seeks to establish partnership with women organisations and non-governmental organisations through various activities. For instance, the Commission regularly pays visits to local women organisations, service agencies and districts. It organises from time to time discussion fora and seminars, in which women groups and non-governmental organisations are invited to participate and exchange views. A collaboration framework was developed in 2004 with the participation of women organisations and other parties who are concerned with gender issues. To further strengthen collaboration with women organisations and other stakeholder groups, the Commission has set up in 2006 a Working Group on Collaboration to develop the strategy and to take forward initiatives on this front.

Closer tie with the Mainland and international liaison

24. In addition, the Commission has fostered a closer tie and better understanding between the Mainland and Hong Kong on women issues. In this connection, the Commission initiated and co-organised with the Government and the All-China Women's Federation the "Joint Events in Celebration of the Beijing + 10" in April 2005 in Beijing. Over 200 delegates from the Mainland and Hong Kong participated in the event to review the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and exchange views on various women issues. In addition, the Women's Commission also joined the HKSAR delegation to attend "The Tenth Anniversary Commemoration of the Fourth World Conference on Women" organised by the Mainland between 29 August and 1 September 2005 in Beijing.

25. The Commission also maintains close networking with relevant regional and international bodies. Members regularly participate in a number of regional and international conferences, such as the annual session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which provides good opportunities for dialogue with overseas experts and brings outside perspectives to the Commission's work. Members are also able to keep abreast of the key women issues in the regional and international arena.

IMPLEMENTATION OF CEDAW AND THE WAY FORWARD

26. Through the three-pronged strategy and continuous efforts as

described above, the Women's Commission is making good progress in advancing the status of women and in promoting the well-being and interests of women in Hong Kong. At the same time, the Government with the assistance of the Women's Commission has also made good progress in the implementation of the CEDAW since the issue of the Initial Report in 1998.

27. For instance, in the concluding comments on the Initial Report of the HKSAR, the CEDAW Committee expressed concern that marital rape was not considered a criminal offence in Hong Kong and the Domestic Violence Ordinance applied only to physical abuse in marital relations. Having regard to the advice of the Women's Commission, the Government had in 2002 amended the Crimes Ordinance to make it clear that marital rape was a criminal offence. The Government has also responded positively to the recommendations of the Women's Commission in tackling the problem of domestic violence. Indeed, over the past two years, the Government has already introduced a series of improvement measures and provided additional resources to strengthen support for victims of domestic violence, e.g. strengthening manpower for services, strengthening co-ordination among frontline professionals, reviewing the shelter service for battered women, improving district welfare planning and coordination, developing a central database on domestic violence and related cases reported to the Police, strengthened publicity efforts and enhanced staff training etc. The Government has most recently announced its proposals for amending the Domestic Violence Ordinance. The Women's Commission welcomes these initiatives and will continue to provide advice to the Government on this important subject.

28. Regarding CEDAW Committee's comments on the low representation of women in governmental advisory boards and statutory committees (ASBs), as noted above, the Government on advice of the Women's Commission has set an initial working target of 25% as a gender benchmark for appointments to the ASBs. While we are glad to see that this initial working target has been reached, we see a need to further empower women to participate more actively in public decision-making. The Commission has suggested the Government to consider raising the benchmark to 30%, and the Commission will continue to play its part to assist in identifying and nurturing suitable female candidates through capacity building.

29. On economic development, Hong Kong is undergoing economic restructuring brought by globalisation, and some specific

groups are facing more difficulties. Some women, especially those who are in their middle ages, less skilled or educated, still encounter difficulties in seeking employment, and in general the median monthly employment earnings of women are lower than that of men. A relatively larger proportion of women are engaged in lower-income jobs and casual labour. We have to find effective ways to further empower the less privileged women and enhance support services, so that they can develop their capability and participate fully in the economy. In this connection, the Government has established a \$300 million Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) to encourage mutual concern and aid, promote community participation and support cross-sectoral partnerships. Part of the objectives of the CIIF is to encourage transformation of dependency roles into contributive roles and increase opportunities for social and economic participation. The Commission fully supports the CIIF and has helped promote it to women's organisations and encourage the latter's participation. Through these CIIF projects, many women have been benefited and there are many positive results generated, including enhanced capacity building, increased self-confidence, and generation of job opportunities that lead to positive economic outcomes. The CIIF of course is not the only solution to address the problem, but proved to be a useful model to empower women.

30. There are also other challenges ahead that have an impact on women and require our attention and continuous efforts, such as the changes and needs arising from the ageing population, the increasing number of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, and the changing family structure of our population. We will also have to address the changing needs and concerns of women, including unpaid homemakers, women with disabilities, as well as those working in the sex industry. The Commission will continue to adopt the three-pronged strategy, i.e. by providing an enabling environment for women, empowering women through capacity building and removing gender prejudice and stereotyping through public education, to further promote the well-being and interests of women in Hong Kong. The Commission will also continue to assist and advise the Government in implementing the CEDAW.

31. Building a harmonious community and promoting gender equality is a matter that requires the joint efforts of all in society. The Women's Commission has set the theme "Together We Build a Harmonious Community" as the goal for the next five years. We will aim to mobilise and partner up with all, including women groups, other non-governmental organisations, schools, business sector and academics,

to achieve this. The Women's Commission's conference to be held in June 2006 with the theme on "Together We Build a Harmonious Community" will provide a good opportunity for all who are concerned about women issues to discuss and explore the future direction and strategies in further promoting gender equality and advancing the status of women in Hong Kong.

Women's Commission
June 2006