

For information
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Legislative Council Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities

**Issues Relating to Ethnic Minority Women
(Including Poverty and Employment Assistance)**

Objectives

This paper briefs Members on the poverty and employment situation of ethnic minority (EM) women in Hong Kong as well as the relevant support services provided by the Government.

Poverty Situation of EMs and EM Women

2. Based on the data from the 2016 Population By-census, the Economic Analysis and Business Facilitation Unit¹ and the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) compiled the Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2016 to facilitate continuous monitoring of their poverty situation. The report was released on 7 February 2018.

3. According to the Report, the EM population in Hong Kong (excluding foreign domestic helpers) stood at 254 700² in 2016. There were 49 400 poor EMs before policy intervention with a poverty rate of 19.4%. The corresponding figures after policy intervention (recurrent cash) decreased to 44 700 persons and 17.6% respectively. Analysed by ethnic group, the poverty risks faced by ethnic groups varied distinctly, with South Asians³ (SAs) at more severe risk. The post-intervention poverty rate of SAs in 2016 was 23.0%, which was visibly higher than the 14.7% of the whole population. The size of their poor population (17 900 persons) was also the largest among various ethnic groups.

¹ Economic Analysis and Business Facilitation Unit was renamed as Office of the Government Economist in April 2018.

² Refers to the land-based population in domestic households.

³ In the analysis of the report, South Asians include Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalese, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans.

4. Working poverty characterised the poverty situation of EMs, mainly because they largely achieved self-reliance through employment but the employment earnings of the poor working population were lower owing to lower educational attainment and skill levels. Furthermore, with generally larger household sizes, such employed persons generally had to shoulder the family burden alone, which rendered it more difficult for them to move out of poverty even with employment, particularly so for SAs. Moreover, the unemployment rates among the poor population of some SA groups (such as Pakistanis) were slightly higher than that of the overall poor population.

5. EMs were generally self-reliant and less dependent on social assistance in the form of cash benefits, while various poverty indicators after recurrent cash policy intervention still fared better than those before policy intervention. The provision of non-recurrent cash and in-kind benefits (primarily public rental housing) contributed further to the improvement of poverty indicators. This reflects that the Government's policy intervention helped relieve EMs of their financial burden.

6. Within the 44 700 EM poor population after recurrent cash policy intervention, there were 24 200 females, representing a poverty rate at 19.1%, higher than the corresponding figures of male EMs (20 600 persons and 16.0% respectively). Female EM poor population mainly consisted of SAs (8 600 persons), followed by Southeast Asians⁴ (6 800 persons). They were mainly females aged 18-64 (14 700 persons) and children aged below 18 (6 600 persons). Analysed further by socio-economic characteristics, although most of the female EM poor population were residing in working households (16 100 persons), they were mostly economically inactive (e.g. homemakers / students) with only 3 600 employed persons. These working poor female EMs were mostly engaged in lower-skilled occupations (83.2%) with a high share of part-timers (40.1%), thereby having generally lacklustre employment earnings.

7. On the whole, as EM families were relatively large with more children (particularly so for SAs), their heavier family financial burden resulted in the prevalence of working poverty. Among them, female EMs generally had to shoulder domestic duties such as taking care of their family members and household chores, so they were less likely to join the workforce or were only able to take up part-time jobs. They were subject to limited household income and a more severe risk of falling below the poverty line.

⁴ In the analysis of the report, Southeast Asians include Thais, Filipinos, Indonesians and Vietnamese.

Working Family Allowance Scheme

8. In order to encourage self-reliance of low-income households through continuous employment and alleviate intergenerational poverty, the Government launched the Low-income Working Family Allowance (LIFA) Scheme in May 2016. Households meeting the eligibility criteria for the Scheme, regardless of the race or gender of their household members, will be granted the allowance.

9. The Working Family Allowance Office of the Working Family Student Financial and Assistance Agency (WFAO) has been striving to provide different measures to assist EMs (including EM women) in applying for the allowance. Apart from publishing the leaflets, posters and samples for completing application form in multiple EM languages, WFAO has enlisted the assistance of the Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents (CHEER) funded by the Home Affairs Department (HAD) to handle telephone enquiries on the LIFA Scheme in EM languages, and provide free telephone and on-sight interpretation service to EMs during the application process. WFAO has also organised a number of briefing sessions or enquiry sessions on filling out the application forms for both non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supporting EMs and various EM communities.

10. The Government introduced a series of enhancements to the Scheme on 1 April 2018. These include extending the Scheme to cover singleton households, allowing household members to aggregate their working hours, relaxing the income requirements and increasing the rates of allowances, and renaming the Scheme as Working Family Allowance (WFA) Scheme. To facilitate EMs in understanding the WFA Scheme and its application details, apart from continuing to organise / attend briefing sessions with the provision of interpretation services in EM languages, WFAO has arranged for the distribution of promotional leaflets and posters in EM languages by schools with more EM students. With the consent of these schools, WFAO also arranged briefing sessions and set up enquiry counters on campus to introduce the WFA Scheme to students and their parents.

11. In addition, WFAO has commissioned over 70 service units of NGOs, including those serving EM groups, to help first-time WFA applicants fill out the application form during the period from April to December 2018. When there is a need to make written enquiries to EM applicants during the application process, WFAO will enclose an information sheet in EM languages in the letter on how to seek language support. WFAO will also proactively arrange telephone interpretation service through CHEER, or by engaging interpretation service on its own, to facilitate the communication between the

WFAO and EMs who speak neither Chinese nor English. The Government encourages eligible individuals (including EM women) to apply for WFA.

Welfare Services for EM Women

12. Apart from encouraging self-reliance of low-income households through the WFA Scheme, the Government also provides social welfare services for all Hong Kong residents in need, irrespective of their gender or race, as long as they meet the relevant eligibility criteria. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has long been concerned about the service needs of EMs (including EM women), and provided services in different areas to assist their integration to the local community, alleviate their adjustment problems and enhance their social functioning and capacity of self-sufficiency.

13. The 65 Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) and the two Integrated Services Centres (ISCs) operated by SWD or NGOs over the territory provide a range of preventive, supportive and remedial family services for families in need (including EM families). To address the needs of EMs in the localities, the Centres have, from time to time, organised various types of groups and programmes. The Centres will also arrange volunteers to reach out to the needy EM families and encourage them to receive services under the Family Support Scheme.

14. Apart from publishing the leaflets, posters and other information documents in multiple EM languages, SWD has enlisted the help from CHEER to provide interpretation and translation services in EM languages to the welfare service units, so as to facilitate EMs to overcome the language barrier to receive social welfare services.

15. SWD has also issued a 'Points-to-note in providing welfare services for EMs' to social workers / social security staff of departmental units and to the social workers of IFSCs / ISCs operated by NGOs with a view to providing some reference information, such as the cultural and living habits of various EM community, to frontline staff serving EM groups. In addition, SWD has assigned a designated person in each administrative district to render internal support to district colleagues for providing welfare services to EMs.

Participation of EM Women in the Labour Market

16. According to the findings of the 2016 Population By-census conducted by C&SD, excluding foreign domestic helpers, the labour force participation

rate (LFPR⁵) of the female EM population in domestic households (51.2%) was the same as the overall female average in 2016. There were, however, big variations among different ethnic groups. Compared with the overall female average (51.2%), the LFPR of Nepalese females (63.2%) was higher while that of Pakistani females (19.0%) was lower. It is also worth noting that between 2011 and 2016, many ethnic groups posted higher LFPRs, particularly in the case of Pakistani women, with an increase of 6.9 percentage points.

17. Employment helps people move out of poverty. The Government has all along been very concerned about the employment situation of EMs. The Labour Department (LD) and Employees Retraining Board (ERB) have been actively providing appropriate employment support services and job-related training for EMs (including EM women) with a view to enhancing their employability and skills.

Employment Support Services for EM Women

18. To cater for the employment needs of EM job seekers (including EM women), LD has all along been providing dedicated employment services including special counters, resource corners and employment briefings, etc. LD has also implemented the Employment Services Ambassador (ESA) Programme for EMs since September 2014, under which trainees of the Youth Employment and Training Programme⁶ who can communicate in EM languages are employed as ESAs to undergo six-month on-the-job training at job centres, industry-based recruitment centres and job fairs. The programme helps LD serve EM job seekers and enriches the EM trainees' own working experience and résumé, benefiting their job search in the open market. Since the launch of the programme, LD has employed 117 ESAs, of whom 86 (73.5%) were female EM trainees.

19. In addition, since May 2017, LD has engaged two employment assistants proficient in EM languages at the Kowloon West Job Centre and the Employment in One-stop on a pilot basis to strengthen employment support for EM job seekers. Apart from partnering with experienced employment officers in providing personalised employment services for EM job seekers, these employment assistants conversant with EM languages and cultures also help LD proactively reach out to EMs with employment needs (including EM women) and encourage them to make use of LD's employment services.

⁵ LFPR is the proportion of the labour force in the population aged 15 and over.

⁶ The Youth Employment and Training Programme implemented by LD provides pre-employment and on-the-job training to young school leavers aged 15 to 24 with educational attainment at sub-degree level or below.

Vocational Training Services for EM Women

20. With a view to improving the employability of EMs (including EM women) and facilitating their integration into the community, ERB provides dedicated training courses delivered in English to suit EMs' aspirations and training needs. In 2018-19, ERB has reserved 800 training places to offer 32 dedicated training courses for EMs, including eight full-time placement-tied training courses and 24 half-day or evening non-placement-tied 'Skills Upgrading Scheme Plus' and generic skills training courses. ERB could arrange teaching assistants who can speak English and EM languages to provide interpretation services or guidance in class to assist those who have difficulties in understanding English. EMs who have completed the dedicated placement-tied training courses are provided with a longer period of six-month placement follow-up services in order to help them enter the job market. To alert EMs that translation / interpretation services can be arranged upon request, 'Notice on Service Enquiries' printed in English and multiple EM languages are posted at the receptions of the Executive Office and service units of ERB, as well as training centres of appointed training bodies. In addition to the three language selections (i.e. Cantonese, Putonghua and English) available for ERB Enquiry Hotline, ERB's customer service team will also arrange interpretation services for EMs in need.

21. ERB also offers subsidies for training bodies to develop supplementary training materials and to provide learning support services⁷ to facilitate EMs who can speak and comprehend Cantonese to attend other training courses for the general public. In addition, to assist EM women who can speak and comprehend Cantonese to take up jobs in healthcare service through training, ERB would select suitable healthcare service courses for developing English training materials in 2018-19.

22. To facilitate the participation in vocational training of EMs in different districts, in 2018-19, ERB continues to collaborate with HAD to offer training courses at its Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities. EMs can also make use of an array of training and employment support services, including enquiry and enrolment services for training courses, industry specific seminars, taster courses, workshops, training consultancy service etc., at the two ERB Service Centres and 22 ERB Service Spots set up in various districts. Training Consultants also visit different district and welfare organisations to offer outreaching training consultancy service to EM women with a view to providing them with suitable training and employment information.

⁷ The subsidy scheme has been enhanced in April 2018, including raising the percentage of subsidy level, in order to encourage the training bodies to participate.

23. To strengthen publicity, ERB sponsors training bodies to organise district-based promotional activities, including large-scale activities such as course and employment exhibitions, district guided tours, etc. to disseminate training and employment information to members of the public (including EMs). In 2018-19, ERB will continue to organise district-based promotional activities dedicated for EMs and extend the ‘Work Experience Activity’ to EMs with a view to stepping up the publicity of dedicated training courses. To promote the training courses and services for EMs, ERB issues promotional leaflets in English and multiple EM languages as well as course prospectus in English, and places advertisements in newspapers issued in English and in EM languages.

24. Separately, eligible charitable organisations may apply for subvention under the Adult Education Subvention Scheme from the Labour and Welfare Bureau to conduct language and re-orientation courses designed for EMs (including EM women), with a view to enhancing their ability to integrate into society and be self-reliant.

Way Forward

25. To enhance collaboration within the Government on support for EMs, the Chief Secretary for Administration chairs a cross-bureau steering committee to co-ordinate, review and monitor the work in this area. The 2018-19 Budget also earmarked \$500 million to strengthen the support for EMs. To support the work of the steering committee, the Special Needs Group Task Force under the Commission on Poverty has arranged focus group meetings with EM representatives and service providers to gather views on the enhancement of services for EMs. The views gathered would be referred to the steering committee for consideration and necessary follow-up action.

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