

OBSERVATION OF HKIWA ON WOMEN'S STATUS IN HONG KONG SAR

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We are writing to comment on the status of women in Hong Kong. We believe that the HKSAR government has taken a number of initiatives to promote gender equality and to protect the rights of women. Hong Kong is a female-friendly city, it has made significant progress towards gender equality.

Background:

The Hong Kong Island Women's Association (HKIWA) was founded in April 2005. It was officially registered as a charity in August 2013. Its service areas cover four districts on Hong Kong Island, including Central and Western District, Wan Chai, Eastern District and Southern District. The organization has over 30,000 individual members and 51 group members. The mission of HKIWA is to unite women's organizations, unleash the potential of women, advocate women's rights, promote women's participation in social affairs and improve the social status of women. The organization aims to provide a platform for today's women to learn, communicate and connect with each other. The aim is to improve women's quality of life and fight for equal rights.

1. Since its inception, HKIWA has actively engaged women from all walks of life in the local community to advocate women's rights and promote women's career development. Through the provision of various training programmes, the organization is able to enhance the professional skills of its members in the workplace and raise concerns about women's health and personal development. To help understand the social and feminine issues affecting local women, the organization often invites female guests from a wide range of backgrounds to moderate and take part in panel discussions. Through these activities, members can have in-depth discussions on topics such as family issues, productivity at work, personal and career development and more. To bring an artistic atmosphere to the community, HKIWA also organizes concerts and arts events.
2. In recent years, women's labour market participation and occupational attainment have improved as the number of educated women in Hong Kong has increased. In particular, income parity with male counterparts has been achieved by more educated women in managerial and professional occupations. Many women have also entered clerical jobs, where the gender pay gap is insignificant. Today, more than half of the students who are enrolled in the programmes funded by our University Grants Committee are women. They are excelling academically, and we believe they will continue to excel professionally. The labour force participation rate (LFPR) was 57.9% in Q1 2023. Male LFPRs were consistently higher than female LFPRs from Q1 2022 to Q1 2023. According to government statistics, the number of persons in employment was 369 200 in Q1 2023. Men were slightly less likely than women to be employed in Q1/2013.
3. Effective 11 December 2020, the Hong Kong Employment (Amendment) Ordinance 2020 extends statutory maternity leave from 10 to 14 weeks for all employees giving birth on or after 11 December 2020. Consider this amendment as a valuable protection against employer dismissal. An employer is prohibited from terminating the employment of an employee who has given notice of her pregnancy unless the employee is summarily dismissed for gross misconduct. Under Hong Kong law, it is of no consequence whether the reason for the dismissal is in relation to the pregnancy or not. The prohibition is an absolute one. In fact, even if the employer is unaware of the pregnancy and gives notice of dismissal, the employer must withdraw the notice of dismissal if the employee gives immediate notice of the pregnancy. Specific provisions to combat discrimination against breastfeeding women were introduced into the Sex

Discrimination Ordinance in June 2002. The changes have been welcomed by breastfeeding mothers and society at large.

4. The Government accepted the recommendation of the Women's Commission (WoC) in the 2015 Policy Address to increase the proportion of female appointments to advisory and statutory bodies (ASBs) of the Government from 30% to 35%. The proportion of women holding non-official positions in ASBs stood at 36.1% at the end of June 2022. Regarding the composition of the Legislative Council, there are 16 (18.6%) female members and 70 (81.4%) male members as of September 2022.
5. Women's contribution to the community and women's empowerment work are highly valued by the Hong Kong SAR government. The **Women's Empowerment Fund (WEF)** was established in June 2023 to subsidize community projects that support women in balancing their work and family lives, to raise women's awareness of their own physical and mental health and to unleash their potential. WEF will provide grants to women's groups and non-governmental organizations for the implementation of appropriate projects in support of local women. The ultimate goal is to promote women's development in Hong Kong by empowering women to realize their full potential in their respective fields, regardless of their age, profession, background, etc.
6. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is constantly concerned about the health issues of women. A general pattern of improving women's health in Hong Kong has been observed. The most visible improvements are seen in the continued declining infant and maternal mortality. However, health problems that increasingly affect women include breast, colorectal and lung cancers, postpartum depression, obesity, and HIV. Breast cancer, which accounted for 28.4% of all new cancer cases diagnosed in women in 2020, has remained the most common malignancy in women since 1994. Colorectal cancer followed, accounting for 12.5% of new female cancer cases in 2020. Lung cancer was the first cancer killer of women in 2020.
7. **The Refuge Centres for Women and the Crisis Support Centre** for Families in Hong Kong also provides shelter for individuals/families who are confronted with domestic violence or who are in a crisis situation. In addition, the **Multipurpose Crisis Intervention and Support Centre** (i.e. CEASE Crisis Centre) provides crisis intervention and support services and links with relevant social and medical services for victims of sexual and domestic violence and for persons/families in crisis or distress. In dealing with cases of sexual violence, the CEASE Crisis Centre follows the principle of "one-stop service" and adopts a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary service model, including 24-hour outreach services/immediate support, counselling services, assistance in arranging medical treatment and forensic examination and reporting to the police, etc. The public is encouraged to report cases of sexual violence to the CEASE Crisis Centre. The public is also encouraged to report cases of threatened violence using the 24h Hotline. These measures can help women to get out of a dangerous situation and ensure that victims of sexual violence receive the support and care that they need in a timely manner.
8. During the 2019 coronavirus pandemic, the HKSAR government took a number of measures to improve the situation of women. These included strengthening support for family carers, addressing violence against women, and providing employment and economic support.

In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hospital Authority maintained normal psychiatric inpatient and specialist outpatient services. It also continued to provide services to appropriate psychiatric patients through teleconsultation. The government also initiated or continued various targeted measures to improve the mental health of the population during the epidemic. These included the "**Mental Health Initiatives Funding Scheme**", which was launched in July 2021, the "Shall We Talk" mental health promotion and public education initiative, which continued during the epidemic, and the "**COVID-19 Grief Support Hotline**", which was set up from March to April 2022 at the height of the fifth wave of the epidemic. This can help protect women's mental health and well-being and reduce social discrimination against women due to mental health problems. This is particularly important for women, who may face additional barriers to mental health due to cultural or social norms.

9. At the same time, the government launched the **Employment Support Scheme** in both 2020 and 2022. The scheme provides temporary financial support to employers to retain employees, regardless of gender, who might otherwise be made redundant. While these support measures are not restricted to women (as any claimant/household that meets the eligibility criteria can apply), women stand to benefit significantly from these measures, as women are usually the ones who take on the caring role of looking after the daily lives of household members.
10. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the HKSAR Government set up a large-scale **Anti-Epizootic Fund (AEF)** in 2020 to, among other things, provide appropriate assistance to businesses and individuals who were severely affected by the pandemic or who were more severely affected by the anti-epizootic measures. Approximately HK\$250 billion has been committed for all AEF measures. At the same time, the Government has implemented many relief measures, including tax concessions, consumer vouchers, etc. The implementation of these measures is also a contribution to the protection of the financial stability and well-being of women.
11. The Central Government has long stood by and supported the HKSAR Government and its people. The Basic Law and the Hong Kong National Security Law safeguard Hong Kong's long-term stability. Hong Kong experienced unprecedented mass riots and unlawful demonstrations in 2019-2020. These acts of violence have seriously damaged our political system. They have divided our people into two antagonistic groups. The enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law and the improvement of the electoral system in the HKSAR will enable more effective law and policy making to promote greater gender equality, and provide clarity and stability to a thriving and conducive environment.
12. In accordance with the decision of the National People's Congress adopted on 11 March 2002, an Election Committee has been set up which is broadly representative, suited to the HKSAR's actual situation and representative of the overall interests of its society. The NPC also proposed that 110 out of 300 seats in the fifth sector of the Election Committee would be filled by HKSAR delegates from the All-China Women's Federation, together with members of other relevant national organizations. This is an indication of the importance the government attaches to women's participation in political affairs.
13. We also see great potential in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area Master Plan and the Qianhai Plan, which will bring unlimited opportunities for Hong Kong enterprises and service providers. As long as Hong Kong proactively participates in



national development, a bright future awaits.

As a local women's association in Hong Kong, we are witnessing how the HKSAR Government, and the people of Hong Kong are working together to implement policies to improve the situation of women and gender equality. In summary, we are optimistic that despite the enormous challenges, with the continued support and efforts of both the government and NGOs, women in Hong Kong can live and grow in a friendly environment.

Hong Kong Island Women's Association
2023/07/12