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## Commission on the Status of Women

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by Hong Kong Federation of Women’s Centres, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres, founded in 1981, is a non-partisan and non-religious women's organization in Hong Kong. We aim at promoting gender equality in Hong Kong through services, education and advocacy.

### **Eliminate all Forms of Violence Against Women**

In Hong Kong, due to the social taboos and reluctance to discuss sexual violence and intimate partner violence, many survivors have not reported the violence they have experienced, nor have they sought assistance from family members, friends or social service organizations. According to the latest survey that was conducted by the Hong Kong Women's Coalition on Equal Opportunities (WCEO), Zonta Club of Kowloon and Lingnan University, analysis of the data showed that 37.5% of the respondents had experienced sexual violence and 26.4% had experienced intimate partner violence. From the in-depth interviews recorded, women who experience intimate partner violence tend to suffer multiple types of violence, such as intimate sexual assault, sexual humiliation, emotional violence, verbal intimidation, being cut off financially or socially, and non-contact physical violence, among others. These different types cause more harm for such women and significantly affect their mental health and feelings of helplessness in such situations. It also shows that only over 40% of the respondents are willing to seek help, and only about 10% of them are willing to seek help from professionals, due to feelings of shame, fear of being blamed by others, and possible impact on other relationships.

The above figures and findings show that sexual and intimate partner violence against women remains a very serious problem in Hong Kong. The government and different stakeholders in the community should provide more support to help them overcome their difficulties, such as improving the current policies and guidelines currently followed to help victims of violence. What are further needed are additional education for law enforcement official and social service providers, more resources for crisis intervention service, and flexible shelters options for women facing immediate threat from violence.

### **Establish an All-rounded Policy to Improve the Situation of Carers**

Women are generally regarded as natural carers and have shouldered a large majority of unpaid work at home. According to the Hong Kong Women in Figures 2021, there are 654,300 full-time home-makers, of which more than 94% are women. However, in Hong Kong there is a lack of formal carer support which would render the unpaid work of these women better recognized as important societal contribution. Recognition of their work in the long run can lead to better skills development and improvement of their well-being and other family members.

Unpaid work is not counted in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and hence impossible to reflect a carer's economic contributions in a convenient and widely-understood way. There are no adequate social protection or retirement protection for full-time carers. According to the statistics from Poverty Report 2020, the poverty rate of women (24.2%) was higher than men (22.9%). Many full-time carers have to spend their savings to pay the bills of caregiving such as travel expenses in escorting the cared for medical appointments. They do not receive an income but in fact are using up their savings.

Hong Kong has insufficient respite services to reduce the daily burden of care. (Carers are difficult to find the respite service to release their pressure or achieve any form of self-development). Traditional norms still see women as the primary carers for the family. Government has not provided adequate support to carers on healthcare

nor community-based care for groups in need such as elderly, chronically ill, disabled or development of children with special education needs, etc. According to the statistics from the Social Welfare Department in Hong Kong, the normal waiting time for residential service for persons with severe physical disabilities in 2019 is more than 17 years, whereas the waiting time for subsidized community care and home care for the elderly 12 months and 26 months respectively. The childcare service for 0–2 years old had only 908 places, and the occupancy rate is 100%, which shows the shortage of childcare services. However, care work for the disabled, the elderly and the young children should be the responsibility of all family members and the society and should not be the sole responsibility of an individual, usually a woman.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified care-giving burden with a demand for a higher standard in hygiene. Class suspensions has meant that more children are now staying at home and increasing the carer's pressure of looking after bored children confined in limited spaces. In a cross-sectional online study conducted in mid-2020 by Hung et al., among the 417 participants who were women aged above 18 and were living in Hong Kong at the time of the study, 32.2%, 42.4%, and 44.9% of participants had negative emotions of stress, anxiety, and depression brought by the pandemic. There are significant negative correlations between emotional state and different aspects of quality of life, but positive correlations between general self-efficacy and different aspects of quality of life. In a survey conducted by "Carer EPS" platform, from late February 2020 to January 2022, among the 1,600 carer respondents, 83% of them were women. 52.5% of them shouldered over 41 hours caregiving and 36.6% of them took more than 61 hours of caregiving during the pandemic. The above studies show that the endless care duties caused massive pressure on women, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the government has insufficient services to support their urgent needs.

Being a carer should be a choice instead of an obligation. We reiterate our calls to urge the international community and the member states of the United Nations to strategically address the difficulties faced by carers and improve their situation. We urge the government to establish a gender-based and carer-oriented policy for carers, especially for many females who are adversely affected. To recognize care work and its economic value, the government should provide a monetary allowance, pension, and sufficient services to reduce the day to day pressure on carers and improve mental wellness. To tackle the dire financial situation of women and carers, it is essential for the government to adopt gender mainstreaming in the policy making process. Providing more opportunities and training for women to re-enter the employment market is one of the solutions to support women's development.

### **A Fair Chance for Single Mothers**

Poverty among single-headed households is common. In 2020, the poverty rate of divorced households was 49.2% in Hong Kong. Failure to receive maintenance payment, care responsibilities and family crises are the reasons that lead to poverty and mental distress of both adults and children in single-headed households as the process of recovering it can be humiliating and confrontational. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many public services including the Family Court that deals with divorce lawsuits were closed. This caused delays in, among many other things, settling outstanding maintenance claims. Establishing an intermediary body to collect the outstanding maintenance payment from the payer and distribute it to the payee will reduce the difficulties faced by single mothers to receive the maintenance payment that they deserve.

Lack of childcare support and vocational training is another obstacle on the personal and career development of single mothers, making them vulnerable to poverty. In 2020, only 29.1% of single-headed households under the official poverty

line who had children to take care of, were able to join the labour force. Although single mothers have experienced marital problems and need to take time to recover, they still have many capabilities and capacities on various aspects once they have a chance. For instance, the provision of affordable childcare service and vocational training will release single mothers from caring responsibility and have time to engage in paid employment or academic or vocational studies to further develop themselves.

### **Recommendations**

To alleviate the pressure faced by carers, to eliminate the violence against women and to prevent single mothers from falling into poverty, we recommend member states of the United Nations to:

- introduce more education and practical supportive measures to promote the awareness of different types of violence and take concrete steps to eliminate all forms of violence against women;
- introduce carer-based policies that recognize carer's contribution to the social and economic advancement of the society;
- provide adequate and appropriate services and social protection for carers so that they can maintain a decent livelihood. This includes but not limited to adequate healthcare, pension, and supportive services for the cared;
- adopt gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment in all public policy and budget formulation to eliminate gender inequality, and make the process transparent for all stakeholders in the society;
- implement supportive measures, such as providing adequate, affordable and accessible childcare services to single mothers;
- establish an intermediary institution to collect outstanding maintenance payment and handle the dispute of maintenance and custody in order to reduce the difficulties faced by single mothers and prevent single-family poverty; and
- deploy additional resources to enhance the necessary support for women and carers according to the UN's five priorities for a socio-economic recovery from pandemic.

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