

WOMEN'S COMMISSION
Welfare Services for Women

INTRODUCTION

This paper : -

- (a) presents for Members' information the provision of welfare services for women;
- (b) informs Members of new initiatives to strengthen services for victims suffering from marital problems, domestic and sexual violence; and
- (c) seeks Members' views on the priorities to carry out these initiatives.

BACKGROUND

2. Apart from the present refuge services providing temporary shelter specifically for battered wives¹, there is no distinction in the welfare services provided to men and women. Welfare services are arranged and managed by programme areas such as family, child, youth and elderly. However, in actual fact, women are often more frequent users of welfare services by virtue of their roles in the family, as mothers and carers. Whether in the nuclear family, extended family or single parent family, women are playing a key role or are the major carers of their family members. Services in support of the family also support women. Services for the elderly and young people, rehabilitation service, financial assistance, etc, provided by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) are contributing to meeting the needs of family members. In the light of changing social conditions and cultural values in Hong Kong, much assistance and support to women is provided through family welfare services. This paper focuses primarily on these family welfare services.

3. The main objectives of family welfare services are :

- a) to preserve and strengthen the family as a unit so that they may provide a suitable environment for the physical, emotional, and social development of its members;

¹ Despite 8% of battered spouse cases where the victim is the husband, we have no similar shelter for men.

- b) to support and enhance family functioning in order to cope with difficulties in family life; and
- c) to restore families in trouble so that they can regain self-reliance.

4. These services include child care assistance, services to assist family members to face crisis or mishaps such as single parenthood, and domestic violence; and family education to strengthen the family's resilience to face problems. Besides providing a wide range of services, new initiatives such as focused services for new arrival families and single parents have been developed to meet the changing needs of the community. The target users of these services are mainly women.

PROVISION OF SERVICES

Coping with Difficulties, Crisis or Mishaps

(a) Domestic Violence

5. Domestic violence, including spouse battering and child abuse, is one of the most acute social problems with damaging effects on the victims, children, their families and society as a whole. Statistics of battered spouse cases from April to December 2000 shows that 92% of the victims are women. Since April 2000, SWD has expanded its three Child Protective Services Unit to five regional Family and Child Protective Services Units (FCPSU) to provide specialized services for families affected by the battered spouse problem or child abuse. Social workers of these units adopt a proactive approach to co-ordinate with concerned government departments, non-government organizations (NGOs) and other professionals to provide a "one-stop" service for the victims. Based on a needs assessment, assistance required by the victims are co-ordinated into a package of counselling, social, financial, medical and psychological services. At present, there are 55 senior social work practitioners at Social Work Officer rank in the five FCPSUs. With an increasing number of cases and complexity of the domestic violence problem, there is a need to strengthen the services of FCPSU.

6. There are three refuge centres for women in Hong Kong, one operated by SWD and two by NGOs. With a total capacity of 120 places and admission on a 24-hour basis, the three centres provide temporary accommodation for women facing domestic violence. In the centre operated by SWD, girls over 13 being abused or sexually harassed, or facing emotional disturbance and other family crisis are also received. During their stay in the centres, social workers of the centres assist them to overcome their trauma, rebuild self-esteem and formulate future plans for accommodation, finance, child care, and schooling for their children. In 2001, the Government has provided an additional social worker to each of the three centres to

strengthen service delivery. In recent years, because of an increasing number of battered spouse cases, we are seeing a higher utilisation of these homes. We are closely monitoring the usage and will consider setting up a fourth refuge where justified (see paragraphs 35 – 36 below).

7. For victims of domestic violence who have children and are undergoing divorce proceedings and facing housing problems, social workers will recommend the family for “conditional tenancy”, which is under the compassionate rehousing scheme of the Housing Department. Other single persons suffering from domestic violence or moving out of public housing because of divorce may apply to the Housing Department for interim housing in the New Territories, or for public housing as a singleton and benefit from a shorter waiting-time. Persons with genuine and immediate long-term housing needs because of social or medical factors will be assisted by compassionate rehousing. Recently, some women groups have expressed concern about the “conditional tenancy” arrangements, particularly the attitude of frontline staff towards those women seeking help. The Director of Social Welfare has arranged to meet with the Hong Kong Association for the Survivors of Women Abuse (Kwan Fook) to discuss the Association’s concern on 16 June 2001.

8. SWD tackles the problem of domestic violence through multi-disciplinary co-ordination, public education, co-ordination of community resources and early intervention. The Committee on Child Abuse and the Working Group on Battered Spouse, with representatives from government departments and NGOs, are convened by SWD since 1983 and 1995 respectively. They formulate strategies to tackle the problems by enhancing multi-disciplinary collaboration, strengthening services for victims and formulate preventive public education measures. Both of these bodies have developed a set of multi-disciplinary procedures for handling cases and a central data system to enhance service delivery and planning.

(b) Sexual Violence

9. With growing concern on the issue of sexual violence, the Government has set up the Working Group on Sexual Violence in May 2000. This inter-departmental working group, convened by SWD, is represented by 12 bureaux and departments working together to examine the current provision and approaches in helping victims of sexual violence. It will work out a set of multi-disciplinary guidelines, coordinate the collection of statistics, advise on the setting up of a sexual violence crisis centre, develop measures to strengthen school and public education and strengthen the training of professionals in handling sexual violence cases.

10. A pilot project to operate a Sexual Violence Crisis Centre by an NGO, the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women, funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust with the support of SWD, will commence operation in mid-2001. The Centre will provide dedicated services to help victims of sexual violence including a hotline, round-the-clock outreach and escorting,

counselling, support group service, training and community education programmes. SWD is represented in the Steering Committee of the Crisis Centre formed by the Association and co-ordinates the advice of the Police, Hospital Authority and Department of Health in regard to this project, while the Working Group on Sexual Violence monitors closely the operation of the Centre to ensure proper interfacing and service delivery to victims of sexual violence.

11. After consulting members of related working groups, consideration is being given by the Administration to amalgamate the Working Group on Battered Spouse and Working Group on Sexual Violence in view of their commonalities and overlaps in handling the abuse and violence problems faced by adults. The proposed amalgamation will close gaps in the coverage of the problem, enable more cost-effective use of resources and expertise, and generate synergy in handling the common problems, as most of victims are women.

(c) Unmarried pregnancy

12. For unmarried women and girls with pregnancy, counselling service and residential care is provided by SWD and NGO homes. Social workers of SWD also provide counselling for the unmarried mothers to assist them to come to a decision on whether to relinquish their parental rights over the child for adoption and their future plans.

(d) Single Parents

13. The welfare of single parents has been a major concern in society. In addition to services provided by family services centres of SWD and NGOs such as counselling, information-giving and referral for assistance, SWD has provided additional resources for NGOs to operate, starting from February 2001, five single parent centres, each in the five Regions. These centres are focal points providing a package of tailor-made services to assist single parents to overcome problems arising from single parenthood, restore resilience, build up a social network of support and mutual help, and improve their capacity for employment and self-reliance. Services provided include counselling, parent education, supportive and mutual help groups, training and supervision on child-minding and other job-related services, information on community resources, and outreaching to needy single parents who need assistance.

(e) New arrivals

14. Among the adult one-way permit holders who enter Hong Kong for settlement, the majority of them are women who come for family reunion. Upon their arrival, some of them experience adjustment difficulty in the living conditions and social environment, personality or marital conflict with the spouse. This is sometimes due to age difference with the spouse, feeling of discrimination and

difficulty in finding a job. To address these special needs and the increasing number of family relationship problems or domestic violence cases involving new arrival women, SWD has provided additional resources for NGOs to operate four post-migration centres and strengthen the staffing provision of four existing ones since February 2001. Through providing a package of focused assistance including language classes, orientation programmes, supportive and mutual help groups, family education, counselling and support in re-training and employment, these centres aim at reducing the adjustment difficulty, enhancing early integration and self-reliance of the new arrivals.

15. SWD also plans to provide pre-migration service, which starts in the Mainland and interfaces with the post-migration service described above, in order to provide early preparation for family members who have been approved to come to Hong Kong. Through a package of integrated services, new arrival women will be assisted in strengthening their ability to cope with the Hong Kong environment, handle relationship difficulties they may encounter and enhance their self-sufficiency. The project is under discussion with the Mainland authorities.

Supporting Women in Child Care

16. The provision of child care services aims at supporting parents and working mothers who have to take up employment or receive re-training. Various forms of child care arrangements have been developed to cater for the changing needs of families.

(a) Day nurseries and creches

17. As at April 2001, there are 253 aided day nurseries (including one operated by SWD which will be phased out later this year), providing 28,923 places for children aged 2 to 6, and 18 day creches with 1,161 places for children aged under 2. The average utilization rate of day nursery and day creche in 1999-2000 is 91% and 77% respectively. In addition, other flexible forms of child care service have been developed to assist parents and working mothers.

(b) Occasional child care service

18. Occasional child care service offers short term child care assistance to parents who have to stay away from home due to sudden engagements. There are 242 child care centres providing a total of 726 occasional child care places over the territory. The service is a means to address the problem of children being left unattended at home. Utilisation for this service is 50% in 1999-2000.

(c) Extended hours service

19. Extended hours service is provided in child care centres to facilitate single parents and working parents who cannot pick up their children during the normal operating hours of child care centres. With additional resources provided by SWD, 112 aided child care centres are providing a total of 1,610 extended hours places from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. to facilitate parents who require longer hours of child care arrangement in order to take up jobs of longer working hours or attend re-training programmes. Utilisation of this service, which only commenced in February this year, is being closely monitored.

(d) Mutual help child care centres

20. To provide other child care alternatives for parents working irregular hours or having other needs, SWD encourages the development of flexible forms of child care arrangement in the community. Mutual help child care centres (licensed for no more than 14 children up to the age of 6) organized by women's groups, church bodies and NGOs would help build a support network at district level and promoting the spirit of mutual help in the neighbourhood in providing child care assistance. SWD provides financial assistance in meeting the setting-up cost of these centres through the Lotteries Fund. Subject to resource availability, the Department also provides rent and rates subsidy. These centres are easily accessible and operated at flexible hours to meet parents' needs. They are also subject to licensing and inspection requirements by SWD's Child Care Centres Advisory Inspectorate. As at March 2001, there are five mutual help centres operated by NGOs. In addition, similar mutual help child care services are available at SWD's Group Work Units in Community Centres and Estate Community Centres.

(e) Supervised child-minding

21. Through the provision of basic training programmes and with supervision and support, some NGOs, including single parent centres, are providing supervised child-minding service. This is a safe and flexible form of tailor made arrangement provided by child-minders in a family environment to meet parents' special child care needs.

(f) Fee Assistance Scheme

22. SWD operates a Fee Assistance Scheme to assist low income families to cover a part or the whole of the child care centre fee. Under the Scheme, low income families with a need for child care assistance pay only part of the fee according to a sliding scale commensurate with their income, while the balance will be met by the Government. In 2000-01, the expenditure on the Fee Assistance Scheme was \$346 million. 54% and 76% of those children attending day nurseries and day creches are claiming fee assistance respectively.

(g) After school care programme

23. After school care programme provides supportive services for children aged 6 to 12 whose parents are unable to provide them proper care in after-school hours due to work or other reasons. Services provided include homework guidance, meals service, parent guidance and education, skill learning and other social activities. As at 1 April 2001, with subvention provided by SWD, 6,000 after school care places are provided by NGOs over the territory. About 10% of these places are allocated to CSSA recipients or low-income families who are attending retraining courses or seeking jobs to enhance their self-reliance. Utilisation of these places is 90%.

(h) Services for disabled pre-schoolers

24. In support of the carers, mainly women, in the care of children having disabilities or developmental delay, special care, early education and training services are provided. There are 22 Early Education and Training Centres providing 1,685 places for these children aged under 2, with an emphasis on the role played by parents, and for other children aged 2 to 6 who need support and training to help them integrate into mainstream services. There are 223 Integrated Programme units providing 1,338 places for mildly disabled children aged 2 to 6 in 197 child care centres, and 1,269 places provided in 25 Special Child Care Centres for those having moderate or severe disability. The Special Provision Programme for Autistic Children aims to help children with autistic disorder to integrate into the daily programme of special child care centres. Services include intensive training programmes, periodic assessment by a psychologist to monitor progress and discharge and guidance to parents. At present, there are 180 places of special provision in 20 special child care centres. In addition, there are six Parent Resource Centres which provide a range of support services to parents and relatives who have to face psychological, financial and social problems in performing their carers' role for children and persons with disabilities.

Family Casework Service

25. Family casework service is provided by 65 family services centres of SWD and NGOs located all over the territory. There are 728 social workers in these centres providing counselling service to individuals and families in need of assistance in resolving their problems. The majority of the service users are women who require service in child discipline, in tackling marital relationship problem, or require other forms of supportive counselling and assistance.

Family Life Education

26. Family life education aims at enhancing family functioning by helping families fulfil developmental tasks at different stages of the family life cycle, adapt to change and cope with stress, strengthen family relationship by equipping individuals with knowledge and skills in coping with changing roles and demands in life, and develop a positive attitude towards family responsibilities. Married couples and parents are two of the five principal target groups receiving this service provided by 79 social workers in SWD and subvented NGOs. While men are found to be a “hard-to-reach” group, the majority of the users are women seeking to enrich their personal, marital and family life.

Family Education

27. Since early 2001, SWD has provided additional resources for both NGO and SWD service units to operate a 2-year family education project. This project aims at providing greater support to parents in guiding their children, handling stress and communication problems and foster a closer parent-child relationship. This service, which is targeted at at-risk families, would help parents who have difficulties in performing their parenting role to handle the children’s behaviour and emotional problems and foster a positive family relationship.

Carers’ Support Services

28. In support of the carer in the family, home help service provides personal care, child minding and home management services of various types to help the elderly, disabled and other individuals in the families. Home care service is a re-engineered mode of home help service covering general home-making assistance, enhanced personal care and nursing care service to the needy family members to relieve carers. While family aide service provides one-to-one training to carers of the family, SWD runs a Family Care Demonstration and Resource centre which provides centre-based training to family members on home management, child care and personal care skills. Carers’ Support Centres are provided by both SWD and NGOs to provide support and training to carers. By making use of these support services, it relieves much of the stress of the carers, mostly women, and enables

them to be engaged in other activities or employment.

Financial Assistance

29. The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme provides a safety net for those who cannot support themselves financially. Under the Scheme, a monthly single parent supplement is payable to single parent families to recognize the special difficulties which they face in bringing up a family. Charitable trust funds are also available to provide temporary grants in special or emergency situations.

CONSULTATION ON PRIORITY OF SERVICE PROVISION

30. In order to strengthen welfare services to assist women and family members to cope with adversity and regain self-resilience, SWD has formulated three initiatives and obtained an allocation of \$16 million in recurrent expenditure starting 2001-02 to implement these services. SWD wishes to consult Members on the priority in implementing these initiatives as listed below :

- (a) to set up a multi-purpose Family Crisis Support Centre;
- (b) to strengthen professional support in the protection of women and children from domestic violence; and
- (c) to set up for an additional refuge for women facing domestic violence.

Multi-purpose Family Crisis Support Centre

31. In order to tackle problems of family tragedy and relationship crisis at an early stage, and assist family members facing marital conflict or relationship breakdown to seek early assistance, SWD intends to set up a Family Crisis Support Centre. The Centre will provide short-term, emergency intervention and support, including overnight accommodation and temporary retreat, to individuals and families facing crisis. In a quiet place with a home-like environment, provided with professional support including counselling, mutual help and self-help groups, hotline service, referral for follow-up services, the Centre will provide a safe place for family members experiencing trauma or intense emotions to calm down and regain their strength. This will help mitigate the occurrence of violence or destructive acts and assist family members to resolve their problems in positive ways. SWD has identified suitable Government premises in Kwun Tong to set up the Centre and intends to commission an NGO to operate this service. To date, some 15 NGOs have expressed an interest to operate the Centre. They will be invited to submit detailed proposals for consideration in due course. The annual recurrent expenditure required is about \$6 million.

Strengthening Services in Family and Child Protective Services Units

32. As recorded by SWD's Central Information System, the number of newly-recorded battered spouse cases has been on the increase :

1998/99	: 1,172 cases
1999/2000	: 1,689 cases (+ 44.1%)
2000/2001 (up to December)	: 1,887 cases (+12%)

33. Most of the battered spouse cases handled show a high degree of complexity involving child abuse, sexual violence and psychological abuse, mental problems, and sometimes even with suicidal and homicidal tendency. Strengthening of crisis intervention and professional input with close collaboration between social workers and clinical psychologists is needed. These include intensive counselling and therapy, provision of therapeutic and mutual help groups to redress the trauma, rebuild self-esteem, and resume the normal functioning of the adult and child victims. Services for batterers through psychological intervention and treatment is also required in order to address the cause of the problem.

34. Currently 55 senior social work practitioners are provided to the FCPSUs at an approved manning ratio of one social worker to handle 30 supervision cases, apart from carrying out outreaching duties, public education programme, statutory duties, participating in district co-ordinating committees to enhance multi-disciplinary collaboration and answering hotline enquiries, etc. We shall need to tap into the new resources allocated to provide additional professional and support staff in strengthening protection to the victims and their children, taking into account the case growth rate of battered spouse and child abuse cases, including those involving legal proceedings. Based on a preliminary proposal, the FCPSUs will require an additional provision of 11 Social Worker Officers, 9 Assistant Social Work Officers, 1 Clinical Psychologist and supporting clerical staff at a cost of \$12.8 million.

Setting up a New Refuge Centre for Women

35. The rising number of battered spouse cases has led to a high utilization rate in the three refuge centres for women, increasing from 68%, 90% to 96% in 1998/1999, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 respectively. There were reported incidents that telephone enquiries from battered spouses cannot be admitted immediately into the refuge centres due to full enrolment. The referring social workers will then have to make other alternative arrangement for them, such as renting other suitable accommodation or living with close relatives.

36. However, a further analysis shows that apart from the Home operated by SWD, which shows full utilization over the year, utilization of the two other NGO

Homes fluctuates during the months of the year. While utilization reached a high rate during summer months and holiday periods, there are several months with utilization fluctuating to below 60%. While SWD is conducting a review on the utilization, turnover, and demand of the refuge service to ensure that service needs are met in a cost-effective manner, a requirement of \$3.2 million is estimated for operation of an additional refuge should the review confirm the need for its establishment.

ADVICE SOUGHT

37. To summarize, financial resources have been secured to strengthen services to protect victims facing domestic violence and marital problems. Members' advice are sought on :

- (a) setting the priority in implementing the initiatives set out in paragraphs 30 to 36 above; or
- (b) to undertake other initiatives having a higher priority in making use of the funding obtained.

Social Welfare Department
May 2001