

WOMEN'S COMMISSION

Strategy for Promoting Women's Participation in Government Advisory Boards and Statutory Bodies

INTRODUCTION

This paper : -

- (a) presents for Members' information measures taken by the Administration in promoting women's participation in government advisory boards and statutory bodies (ASBs);
- (b) analyses difficulties in enhancing women's participation in ASBs; and
- (c) seeks Members' views on possible measures in further promoting women's participation in ASBs.

BACKGROUND

2. Enhancing women's participation in decision making and social participation is an important part of the empowerment of women strategy, and participation in Government ASBs constitutes a crucial aspect of community involvement. This subject is a matter of concern in many countries and international fora. Many governments have introduced active measures to involve more women in their policy making and legislative processes. At the last hearing of the HKSAR report under the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) held in early 1999, the CEDAW Committee showed concern about the low representation of women in ASBs and recommended that the Government make use of affirmative action and temporary special measures¹ to realise women's right to participate in all areas of public life and particularly at high levels of decision-making. It also

¹ In accordance to CEDAW Article 4 paragraph 1

recommended that the Government study the experience of other countries with a view to applying them in Hong Kong.

3. At present, among the some 8,500 ASB non-official memberships currently available, only about 20% of the seats are filled by women. Local women's groups have time and again raised concern about the relatively low level of women's participation in ASBs, especially in view of the education, qualifications and skills attained by women in Hong Kong nowadays. Indeed the level of participation has not increased substantially over the past years. Women groups have suggested that women face obstacles in participation in ASBs, and that they have called for more proactive actions to increase more women's participation.

4. The Women's Commission recognises the concerns brought up by the community groups and holds the view that participation in ASBs would help bring about the realization of due rights of women. By facilitating women's full and active participation in all spheres of public and private life and decision making, women will be given the opportunity to realise their full potential and use their wisdom and experience to contribute to policies and programmes. Policy makers would also benefit from a more balanced gender composition on these ASBs, for it would enable the perspectives and concerns of both genders to be more fully reflected, and the Government would be able to benefit from all-round advice and gauge the views of both genders more extensively through the ASBs. This would in turn enhance public acceptance of the policies concerned and would be conducive to positive social development. The Women's Commission has therefore had several meetings with the Government to discuss this subject². The Administration has been urged to take a proactive approach and measures to enhance women's participation.

MEASURES TAKEN BY THE ADMINISTRATION IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ASBS

5. Before June 2002, the Administration had not given any particular attention to the gender composition of ASBs in making new appointments / reappointments. Findings of a questionnaire survey carried

² Women's Commission and the Empowerment Task Force have met with HAB and HAD in March 2001, January 2002, November 2002 and March 2003.

out among policy bureaux covering 75 policy areas in February 2002 reflected that a large majority (around 75%) of the respondents considered “gender” a very unimportant criterion in making appointments to ASBs. Most respondents said that the most important factors were the individual candidates’ ability, professional knowledge and standing.

6. The matter was considered by a Policy Group chaired by the Chief Secretary in June 2002. A decision was taken that while the principle of appointment by merit should be supported, the current gender imbalance and under representation of women in ASBs should be addressed. The gender composition of ASB should be taken into account when making appointments. Proactive actions should be taken to enhance the level of women’s participation in ASBs.

7. Measures taken by the Administration to enhance women participation include the following:-

- (a) an initial “working target” of 25% has been introduced as a benchmark for women’s participation in ASBs;
- (b) bureaux and departments have been asked to take a critical look at the membership of their ASBs, especially those with low representation of women;
- (c) more proactive efforts should be made by bureaux and departments to reach out, identify and cultivate women who are able and willing to contribute to the work of ASBs;
- (d) bureaux and departments are requested to contribute data on potential women candidates for input into the Central Personality Index (CPI) managed by Home Affairs Bureau; and
- (e) bring the matter periodically to the attention of staff who deal with appointments to ASBs.

8. In addition to the above measures, with a view to expanding the pool of suitable potential women candidates for appointments to ASBs, the Administration has appealed to some 270 women’s associations, professional bodies and chambers of commerce as well as personnel management

executives to invite women interested in serving on ASBs to send in their CVs for inclusion in the CPI. To raise their interest in the matter, SHA has offered to brief members of these organisations on the work of ASBs. As of August 2003, 305 CVs forms were received as a result of the various appeals.

9. By October 2003, there were about 8,500 non-official members serving on about 500 ASBs. About 20.1% of them were women, compared to 18.6% as at 3 June 2002. For the same period, the percentage of women among candidates in the CPI rose from 19.6% to 21.2%.

FACTORS HINDERING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ASBs

10. The findings of the time use survey recently released indicated that lack of time was the primary barrier to participation in community activity. A vast majority suggested that they were too busy to participate. Indeed, it was noted from the survey that women made significantly larger contribution to the caring of family members, relatives and friends. Being the carer of the family, they tend to put family interests in a higher priority. Without the necessary family support and other supporting services (such as child care facilities), women would be under tremendous pressure if they were to participate actively in ASBs.

11. Some women, especially those from the grassroot level, have expressed that they lack the confidence and skills to participate actively in public life. They also claim that there are not efficient training opportunities for them to build up their capacity and confidence.

12. At the institutional level, despite the fact that more and more women have entered various professional fields, we observe that an "old boys club" culture still prevails in some fields, in particular those areas where women are vastly out-numbered. Many professional bodies and chambers of commerce are still predominated by men. This might have a deterrent effect on women's participation in the organisation's council or committee as well as the decision making process of the organisation.

13. Since meetings of Advisory Boards and Statutory Bodies are usually organized in the daytime, employers' support towards their employee's participation in public service is essential. It is observed that in general large

multi-national corporations have been more supportive towards participation in public service and more positive in promoting diversity as their corporate culture. Small and medium firms, which are the majority in the market, understandably have more difficulty in releasing staff for such community work. This has implications for ASB participation for both women and men.

14. In addition, some women are still bound by the traditional value that the political arena is not their playing field, and that their strengths rest with the family. Without an enabling environment, it is difficult for women to break the invisible barrier.

POSSIBLE MEASURES TO ENHANCE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

15. With an increasing pool of well-educated and talented women in the community, there is scope for the Government to appoint more women into ASBs. The Empowerment Task Force, having considered the various difficulties faced by women (paragraphs 10-14 above) as well as the various measures adopted by the Government, had come up with and **recommend** for the Commission's consideration the following suggested steps which might be adopted to further enhance women's participation in ASBs :-

- (a) the Administration to organise briefing sessions to introduce the work of ASBs to interested women and to invite serving women members of ASBs to share their experience with the audience;
- (b) the Women's Commission and the Administration to encourage NGOs, academia or professional bodies to provide relevant capacity building programmes for women interested in work of ASBs and to initiate mentorship schemes;
- (c) the Administration to consider and implement measures to make better use of the existing women candidates in the CPI;
- (d) the Administration to take measures to expand the number of women candidates in CPI, such as following up with organisations which have been approached earlier on for names of candidates interested in serving on ASBs;

- (e) the Women's Commission to encourage women's groups and organizations to refer women who are capable and willing to serve on ASBs to the Administration;
- (f) the Women's Commission to appeal to employers to encourage and facilitate their employees, particularly female employees, to serve on ASBs and to suggest names, if possible;
- (g) raising community awareness of the importance of women's participation in public life through WoC's public education programme; and
- (h) the Women's Commission to facilitate cross-strata collaboration, encourage networking and experience sharing.

WAY FORWARD

16. To effectively enhance women's participation in ASBs, the Administration, Women's Commission, NGOs, and other sectors in the community need to work in collaboration. The Administration would continue to step up efforts in reaching out and cultivating women with potential and interested in serving on ASBs. The Women's Commission could play a catalytic role by facilitating cross-strata cooperation, experience sharing and networking, as well as to contribute to the expansion of the pool of women candidates and help raise awareness of the matter. NGOs, with their extensive network in the community, could help bring women out into the community and participate more fully in other aspects of life. It is only through empowerment of women themselves and the creation of an enabling environment that we could achieve a more balanced gender composition in ASBs. We should periodically review the situation and step up efforts as appropriate.

ADVICE SOUGHT

17. Members were invited to:-
- (a) note the measures taken by the Administration in promoting women's participation in ASBs (para 6-9); and
 - (b) consider the possible measures recommended by Empowerment Task Force in promoting women's participation in ASBs (para 15).

Women's Commission Secretariat
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