

**Statement by the Honourable Matthew Cheung Kin-chung,  
Secretary for Labour and Welfare of HKSAR,  
at the High-Level Policy Dialogue on Women and the Economy  
In San Francisco, USA  
On Friday 16 September 2011**

Secretary Clinton, Distinguished Delegates,

My warmest congratulations to the United States government and Madam Secretary yourself for launching this high-powered summit. It is a highly commendable initiative.

In the space of just a few generations, Hong Kong, China has transformed from a small fishing village, into a major manufacturing hub and more recently into an international business and financial centre. Women have been fully engaged in this economic transition every step of the way.

Today, Hong Kong is a services and knowledge-based economy with women playing a key part in our city's progress.

Let me stress that Government of Hong Kong, China is fully committed to empowering women in the workforce.

In 1996, we established the Equal Opportunities Commission. Among its priorities is to ensure gender equality in the workplace. The Commission

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enforces legislation on eliminating discrimination on the grounds of gender and family status, among other areas.

Our Women's Commission was established in 2001. It plays a high-level strategic role in advising the Government on policies, legislation and services affecting women.

In promoting the interests and well-being of women in the economy, we have adopted a three-pronged approach – what we call the three “E’s” strategy. In a nutshell, this includes, Educating, Enabling and Empowering women to play a full role in the economy.

On access to capital, it is illegal in Hong Kong to discriminate against women on the grounds of gender by refusing to provide banking or insurance facilities.

We have set up various loan and financing guarantee schemes to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in obtaining bank loans. These schemes provide equal access to capital for all business operators.

We are also carefully studying the feasibility of establishing a sustainable microfinance scheme. This would benefit small business owners, men and women alike.

On 1 May this year, which coincided with the International Labour Day, Hong Kong successfully introduced its first statutory minimum wage legislation. This marked a significant milestone in Hong Kong's social development and labour protection. It also underlines our commitment to

improving the well-being of our grassroots employees, many of whom are women.

Since the statutory minimum wage was introduced, more women have joined the labour market and found jobs, compared to last year. This suggests that women have benefited more than men from the new legislation.

Turning to access to markets, Hong Kong, China has a highly transparent regulatory regime. Information on the domestic regulatory requirements is widely publicised through different media including the Internet. The household broadband penetration rate in Hong Kong is among the highest in the world at around 85 per cent. We also have more than 9,000 public Wi-Fi access points across the city. This gives everyone easy and equal access to market information.

According to both the US-based Heritage Foundation and the Fraser Institute in Canada, as the world's freest economy, Hong Kong thrives on open markets and free flows of capital, information, ideas and talent.

This has been our recipe for success. We will keep up our efforts to build on these essential qualities which make Hong Kong, China tick.

On capacity and skills building, it is important to note that SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) form the backbone of Hong Kong, China's economy. Ninety eight percent of our private corporations are SMEs.

To enhance their capacity, we provide various services including business counselling, advisory and mentorship schemes - all free of charge.

To promote the overall quality of our workforce, we have a wide range of publicly funded vocational training, retraining and continuing education opportunities. Our aim is to support all workers to enhance their competitiveness and employability in order to meet the challenges of economic restructuring and globalisation.

Our vocational training programmes are mainly provided through the Employees Retraining Board and the Vocational Training Council. Their courses are market oriented and are open to men and women alike.

Since its inception in 1992, the Employees Retraining Board has provided about 1.6 million training places. Women's participation in its courses reaches 75 per cent. It is particularly high for courses on domestic services, beauty therapy, retail, healthcare services and hotel services.

To encourage our workforce to pursue continuing education, we have set up since 2002 the Continuing Education Fund, with an injection of US\$800 million (HK\$6.2 billion). So far, the Fund has benefited over 442 000 applicants. The beneficiaries range from 18 to 65 years old, with about 58 per cent of them being women.

In 2004, our Women's Commission launched the Capacity Building Mileage Programme as a key initiative in empowering women. The Programme is delivered through radio, Internet and face-to-face courses run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Courses cover financial management and managing interpersonal relationships as well as other practical issues. Since its launch, the Programme has encouraged women of different backgrounds and

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educational levels to pursue life-long learning and self-development. Students gain knowledge and confidence as well as guidance in sharpening their problem-solving and communication skills.

Next month we will launch a new Work Incentive Transport Subsidy Scheme to ease the burden of transport costs on employees from low-income households. In formulating the eligibility criteria of the scheme, we have taken into account the needs of part-time workers. This is especially important for female employees who also have families to care for.

Turning to women's leadership, to encourage equal opportunities for women in leadership roles, it is important to promote family-friendly working practices as well as a healthy work-life balance. We have been promoting family-friendly employment practices in this regard.

We believe that the advancement of women can be enhanced if gender prejudices and stereotyping is eliminated. This can be done through education from a young age and developing school curricula to avoid gender stereotyping of students.

Our Women's Commission has launched publicity programmes, including open forums and seminars, television drama series, radio programmes and competitions aimed at reducing gender prejudice and stereotyping in society.

To enhance women's leadership in the public sector, the Hong Kong Government takes gender composition into account in appointments to Government Advisory and Statutory Bodies. Having met the initial target of 25 per cent as a benchmark for women's participation in 2005, we have increased the target to 30 per cent since last year.

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In Government, about 41 per cent of our Permanent Secretary posts, the highest rank in the civil service, are currently held by women.

This ratio is almost matched in the private sector. According to the 2011 Grant Thornton International Business Report<sup>1</sup>, 35% of our senior management positions in private businesses are held by women. The report ranks Hong Kong, China fourth among 39 economies in terms of the percentage of women in senior management positions.

Education is the key to capacity building and nurturing leadership. Hong Kong, China's continuing heavy investment in education has provided wider access to tertiary education for female students. In the 2010-11 academic year, 53.7% of the total university enrolment of all programmes funded by the Government were female students. For taught postgraduate programmes, 61.6% of the students were women. It is important to note that female students accounted for 63.4% of the total student enrolment in the social science programmes, 55.9% in business and management, 51.4% in dentistry, and 50.1% in medicine. Even for the sciences, 35.4% of the students were female whilst the proportion for engineering and technology stood at 33.5%, compared with a low of 14.1% in 1996-97.

Ladies and gentlemen, we will continue to foster a level playing field for business in Hong Kong, China, and that includes a level playing field for women's participation in the economy

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Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> The Grant Thornton Business Report conducts survey over 11,000 businesses per year across 39 economies. It draws upon 19 years of trend data for most European participants and nine years for many non-European economies. A press release on the 2011 Grant Thornton Business Report is attached for reference.