



2 Review of Services Concerning Women

Reviewing Policies to Promote the Well-being of Women

RESPONSE

Listening to needs

Pooling resources

All is possible

For a better tomorrow

Part of the Women's Commission's work, among other things, is to keep under review services delivered within and outside the Government, identify priority areas for action and monitor the development of new or improved services with regard to women's needs. During the past three years, the Commission reviewed key services for women's empowerment and well-being, including welfare services, family services, services for victims of violence and violence prevention programmes, support for new immigrant women and single parents, adult and continuous education, employment services and job-related training, women's health programmes, information technology programmes, public housing, parent education and childcare facilities.

While noting the Government's delivery of such services, the Commission urged that women's perspectives be taken into account; and in particular, to consider women's specific circumstances and needs when delivering these services. The Commission's position and advice given are set out below:

Women-Focused Welfare Services

Discerning Eyes

"As citizens of Hong Kong, we are doing fine, considering the range of benefits that we can enjoy. Yet something is still amiss. Is it because of some oversight in our welfare policies, or that policy-makers still do not see things from a woman's point of view?"

As the majority of those using welfare services are women, the Commission was concerned whether such services were designed and delivered with a women's focus. The Commission discussed this with Social Welfare Department in May 2001.

We stressed that women's perspectives should be considered when formulating welfare services and that some services, especially those related to women's development, might need to adopt a woman-centred approach.

Empowering Women in Crisis

Every Family Has Stormy Times

"The company folded last year and since then my husband has been unemployed. He drinks to drown his sorrows and is often bad-tempered. My relationship with my mother-in-law hasn't been too good all along and I feel embarrassed to take my troubles to my own family..."

The Commission regards women as the "gravitational force" in a family and community as they strengthen cohesion among family members and help build social networks for the family and social capital in the community. When reviewing family and welfare services in May and July 2001, the Commission found many women facing family crises were reluctant to seek assistance. We therefore suggested that the Government adopt an out-reach approach, with local women's groups and centres contacting women in need, and partnerships established with local community organisations to deliver family services in a proactive manner. Members agreed on the need to strengthen support for families with problems and recommended funding support to set up a multi-purpose Family Crisis Support Centre so that emergency intervention could be provided to individuals and families in need.

A Family Split Between Two Cities

"Who prefers her husband to work in Mainland China? It weakened our marriage and also made my husband less concerned about the kids. He has not been home for the past three weeks and has only called once in all that time. Perhaps he has a mistress there. But what can I do? I have no one else to depend on."

The Commission was also concerned about the growing problems faced by "split families", for example, when one member works in Mainland China. Members were concerned about the fragmentation of, and difficulty in accessing, family services in such cases and that family service centres were not able to fully meet women's needs. We suggested restructuring these services so that they were

more easily available, integrated and free from stigma and that they support women's development rather than determining the role women should play. Members were supportive of the proposed Integrated Family Service Centre (offering preventive, empowering, supportive and remedial services) and recommended that a wider variety of services, including emotional support, volunteering, vocational and leadership training, be provided to meet women's needs, and enhance social relationships and participation of all users. Local women's groups should be involved to maximise informal or peer support.

The Commission further pointed out that family services had become case-work dominated and remedial. We thus recommended such services be re-oriented to become more proactive, diversified and community-based, and that more outreach and assistance could be provided to deal with potential problem families at an earlier stage. Improving men's utilisation of family services was another way of empowering women.

Zero Tolerance Towards Domestic Violence

Lingering Shadows

"I could not take his ranting and beatings any longer. But I was in a dilemma. I was afraid my two children would suffer terrible psychological and physical harm. Yet I didn't want them to grow up in a single-parent family."

Members were aware of the increase in domestic violence cases, the majority of which involved women victims. The Commission was of the view that violence against women should not be tolerated and we suggested that the Government adopt a holistic and preventive approach in handling domestic violence cases. The Commission noted that children in families who suffered from domestic violence were more at risk of becoming perpetrators when they grew up, creating a vicious cycle. We therefore also suggested that the Government look into perpetrators' problems and help children to become more resilient to challenges.

With a view to improving existing services, the Commission supported the setting up of a fourth refuge for battered women and recommended strengthening Social Welfare Department's Family and Child Protection Service Units' professional support. It was suggested that young people could be involved in planning family education and public education programmes, and the possibility of treatment or mandatory counselling for perpetrators looked at.

Integration of New Immigrants

Strangers in a City

“Sometimes, I am afraid to go into the urban areas by myself. Hong Kong changes so quickly and I have not yet overcome my fear of strange surroundings... My daughter is also facing difficulties at school. More than once she has come home in tears, saying she has been teased by her classmates for being a new immigrant.”

The Commission is aware that about 70% of new immigrants from Mainland China are women, and nearly half are aged between 25 and 44. Many are in disadvantageous situations and face difficulties, such as applying for public housing, looking for jobs, language barriers and family problems. In May 2001, the Commission discussed with Home Affairs Department the services provided for these new arrivals and suggested that counselling, parenting education, language classes, adult education, and vocational training or re-training programmes should continue to be provided to facilitate early integration. District-based groups could also organise community-building initiatives to help these women keep active socially, develop their own potential and independence, and contribute to the community.

Capacity Building Through Continuing Education

Give Me Wings So I Can Soar to the Heavens

“My eldest daughter recommended that I take some training courses. But I am already in my forties and only have a primary education. Will I be able to manage? I looked through the booklet she brought home but didn’t find anything suitable. I also have to look after the family. Where will I find time to attend courses?”

Empowerment is essential for the development of women’s potential. Thus the Commission has adopted “capacity building” as a major theme. Members noted that while there are many adult education or training programmes, women’s development needs are not fully catered for. We discussed this with the then Education Department in July 2001 and recommended that the Department use its additional financial provision in 2001/02 and 2002/03 to enhance adult education opportunities, especially day-time courses, so that the programmes offered could



reach more women. Programmes also needed to be more flexible and focus on basic literacy and generic skills.

Members suggested co-ordination between government bureaux and departments in the provision of adult education to avoid duplication and to ensure programmes meet women's needs. Members also advised the Government that relevant sex-disaggregated data should be collected and analysed when designing and offering such courses.

Empowering Women in Employment

Working Towards Hope

"My youngest son is in secondary school now. I really hope to work again so I will not be so disconnected from society. I would also like to contribute to the family's finances and ease my husband's burden. But employment opportunities for a woman nearing 50 are thin..."

Economic well-being is a key issue related to women's empowerment. The Commission found that many women, in particular middle-aged or less skilled women, faced difficulties in finding paid employment opportunities. By taking an overview of women's participation in the labour force and examining the employment-related services provided by Labour Department, Employees Retraining Board and Vocational Training Council, we observed that women's participation in the labour force had remained more or less the same over the years. Lower-paid work or elementary occupations were taken up mainly by women, while the number of women occupying managerial positions was considerably less than men. Middle-aged women, especially new immigrants and those who had stopped work to care for children, encountered difficulties in entering and re-entering the labour market.

The Commission considered training and re-training opportunities should be improved to facilitate women's participation in the employment market and other

aspects of community life. We suggested that the possible differential impact on women and men should be taken into account when formulating and implementing training and re-training policies and courses. Timing of courses and location of re-training centres should take women's needs into consideration. We also suggested that the Administration collect more sex-disaggregated statistics on the employment situation (especially women's income).

Days of Independence

Although my daughter and I can subsist on comprehensive social security assistance, I have always hoped to be a strong single parent and to find a job so we can support ourselves."

In December 2001, Members met Social Welfare Department to discuss the "Ending Exclusion" package which encouraged single parents on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) to seek employment. We noted the project was client-centred and integrated services (including the voluntary employment assistance programme, seminars, training and recreational programmes) were provided to address the needs of single parent families under CSSA. We believed the outreach and cross-sector co-operation approaches adopted by the project were useful in supporting single-parent families on CSSA at neighbourhood level.

We were impressed by the notion that single parents who had received services through the project would be recruited as volunteers to reach out to other single parents. We were of the view that the project could effectively empower single parents (the majority of them women). We suggested that the spirit of mutual help should be promoted among service recipients and the setting up of co-operative mutual help childcare centres encouraged to support single parents taking up paid jobs. Members also suggested that employment assistance and training be stepped up and longitudinal studies conducted to evaluate the project's effectiveness.

Women's Health

Fit and Over Forty

"Mrs Wong, who lives next door, said that when a woman reaches 40, she should take good care of her health. I know that a woman should have an annual medical checkup but I have no regular ailments and it isn't cheap to go to a private clinic..."

Women's health is another important aspect of empowerment as improving women's general state of health would enable them to participate more fully in society. The Commission looked into public health services and health promotion programmes provided for women (including new immigrants) by Department of Health.

While noting that comprehensive women's health services are provided at a very low cost by the public sector, we suggested that Department of Health take further steps to develop a territory-wide breast cancer screening programme, which was becoming a health issue for women. We suggested that the Department improve accessibility to its services through wider publicity and more woman-friendly service hours at Maternal and Child Health Centres and should collaborate closely with the subvented sector to optimise resources. Department of Health was also urged to collect more health data on patterns of disease and illness among women.

The Commission was particularly concerned that the cervical cancer screening programme should reach women at large, in particular high-risk women. The Department was invited to look into the possibility of setting up a central register for screening records to facilitate information tracing. In addition, the Commission offered to collaborate in promoting and publicising the programme among women's groups and organisations.

The Commission was concerned about women's mental health and specific health needs of disabled women and suggested the Department look into improvements. Members also suggested assistance for women and girls to combat sexually transmitted diseases, and the enhancement of health education related to teenage pregnancy. In promoting breastfeeding, the Department was invited to look into the provision of support facilities in public places and the workplace.

Bridging the Gender Digital Divide

Cyber Fun

"What for? To lessen the gap between me and my kids."

"To send e-mails to friends overseas."

"To understand the outside world."

The Commission has been concerned about the possible existence of a "digital divide" in access to information technology, especially among middle-aged and

elderly women. The subject was discussed with Home Affairs Department and Information Technology Services Department in May 2001 and January 2002, and Members urged the Government to take up initiatives promoting IT usage among women, for example, training and provision of IT facilities.

The Commission suggested that the Government integrate gender mainstreaming in formulating IT policies and collect statistics to identify any gender difference in IT usage and barriers faced by women in accessing IT. Regarding IT training, we were of the opinion that it was important to address access difficulties for women who were illiterate or with a low level of education. To ensure IT courses would take into account the possible diversity in participants' educational attainment, the Commission suggested that the Government tailor IT training programmes to meet the diverse needs and skill levels of women, and to provide them in these women's neighbourhood.

We also suggested that the Government take women's viewpoints into account in promoting IT usage, for example, women are more motivated to learn about and use IT if it can help them in their daily lives. With regard to improving IT access among grassroots women, the Commission suggested that the Government provide more facilities by partnering with the private sector and encouraging community organisations to set up community cyber points and mobilise local women's groups in promoting IT usage.

Public Housing and Women

A Modest Hope

"I hope to have my own identity. To rebuild my own home!"

During our visits to women's groups and service organisations, we received feedback on the difficulties experienced by many new immigrant women, and women facing family crises or violence, in applying for public housing units. Many women felt their rights were not protected. If their husband was the registered tenant of the public housing unit, this meant the woman was usually the party that had to move out in cases of violence or family disputes. The Commission met with the then Housing Bureau and Housing Department in October 2001 to discuss public housing allocation policies, tenancy management issues and the problems faced by women in particular.

We suggested that Housing Department look into the possibility of allowing husband and wife to register as joint tenants of a public housing unit and to widen the eligibility of conditional tenancy to cover women who were legally separated from their spouse (pending divorce proceedings). We also suggested that Housing Department terminate a tenancy if it was evident the tenant had been violent towards or abused his/her family members and that the victim be offered housing assistance.

Noting that inconsistent advice had sometimes been given by different frontline staff on conditional tenancy matters, we suggested that the Department publicise its guidelines more widely. On the advice of the Commission, Housing Department has now revised the conditional tenancy policy so that a battered spouse who has petitioned for divorce but has no dependent children, or who does not have custody of dependent children, may now apply for conditional tenancy.

On Becoming Good Parents

A Mother's Blues

"When I was small, I always felt that my parents could not understand me. But now I have become a parent, I find I cannot understand my children either."

Since women play an important role in caring for family members, in particular the younger generation, the Commission discussed the work of the then Education Department on parenting education in January 2002, and took the opportunity provided by the July 2002 consultation exercise on harmonisation of kindergarten and childcare centres to advise the Government on pre-primary services.

In respect of parenting education, we recognised that women, especially homemakers and women with dual roles, experienced considerable stress in caring for children. Members were of the view that improving parenting skills could help reduce this stress, which would be beneficial to women's mental health and leave them with more energy to participate more fully in the community. The Commission considered parenting education programmes should be gender-sensitive and tailored to accommodate parents and children from different backgrounds with different needs. Members suggested the then Education Department should adopt gender mainstreaming in designing parenting education programmes, which should feature sex education, skills and knowledge to rise to life's challenges, learning outside the classroom and a culture of appreciation.

Members believed that parenting education required multi-sector co-operation. We noted that resources were provided specifically to support this type of work (for example, the production of parenting education material, training of parenting education workers and implementation of territory-wide promotional activities), and Social Welfare Department could partner with local Maternity and Child Care Centres in conducting parenting education. We stressed that women should be empowered and recommended that training be provided to parent volunteers who could then conduct parenting education for their peers. We also pointed out that carers included grandparents and domestic helpers who should be trained under these programmes.

We advised the Administration that parenting education conducted through Parent-Teacher Associations and schools would be more effective in mobilising parents, especially more passive and hard-to-reach parents, and that men should be encouraged to participate in parenting education programmes. The Administration was also encouraged to collaborate with women's groups in this respect. We believe that the latter with their well-established community networks can reach out to more parents.

Regarding harmonisation of pre-primary services, in view of the gradual decline of the birth rate, some under-subscribed childcare centres and kindergartens could either be relocated to new towns, closed down or turned into a new type of service (for example, mutual help childcare centres).

Members found the proposed system of three types of pre-primary care services (that is, childcare centres, kindergartens and kindergartens-cum-day nurseries) under different systems of supervision quite confusing. It was suggested that the kindergartens-cum-day nurseries for children aged between two to six should be brought under the then Education Department. Members did not consider it appropriate to introduce a through-train mode for childcare centres and kindergartens as they were distinct services. They were of the view that a joint Social Welfare Department/Education Department office to supervise kindergartens-cum-day nurseries' operations would streamline current procedures and be more convenient for parents and service operators. As local women's groups could reach out to parents through their networks more effectively, Members also suggested that the Government involve these groups in public education programmes.

METAMORPHOSIS
Prejudices wither
Hearts open
Now there is pride
In deciding what lies
ahead