



THE **WOMEN'S**
FOUNDATION

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The Status of Women and Girls in Hong Kong 2006

Executive Summary

Commissioned by:
The Women's Foundation

Sponsored by:





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Vision

We envision a Hong Kong where all residents -- girls and boys, women and men -- thrive by having equal access to resources and opportunities.

Mission

The mission of The Women's Foundation is to promote the full participation of women and girls in all aspects of Hong Kong society through research, education and public awareness.

Goals

- ◆ To mobilize local and international financial resources to help women and girls in Hong Kong.
- ◆ To commission a comprehensive, objective, independent research study of the current status of women and girls in Hong Kong.
- ◆ To publish and disseminate all research to donors, NGOs serving women & girls, and the wider community.
- ◆ To convene stakeholders in the community to develop informed strategies and specific initiatives based on research findings.
- ◆ To commission ongoing research, using the first study as a benchmark, to help define issues and to measure progress of community efforts to ensure the full participation of women and girls in Hong Kong society.
- ◆ To fund projects which offer strategic solutions to problems facing women and girls in Hong Kong.

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“There is now overwhelming evidence that women’s [and girls’] empowerment and economic development has the most far reaching effect in improving the lives of all... men, women and children.”

Nobel Laureate and Economist Amartya Sen, at the 2000 Commencement of Harvard University

Introduction

The conclusion of the Report can be summarised quite simply: there is far too little research focused on women and girls in Hong Kong. We have some basic facts, few details and almost no information about causal factors, without which change is impossible. There is a dearth of Information about girls, our very future, and almost nothing about women who are not of the majority Chinese ethnic group. Women in mid-life are not studied and the feminisation of poverty receives little attention. Thus, there is much to learn.

Apart from some government work such as the helpful annual publication of Key Statistics: Women and Men in Hong Kong, which provides a gender breakdown in major areas of government statistics, and work Commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the Women’s Commission (WoC), most large scale research studies, such as the studies commissioned by the Central Policy Unit (CPU), do not adopt a gender specific approach in data collection and analysis. Statistics and data available on government websites do not have gender breakdown in general either. A gender specific approach to studies of all kinds, comparing situations of male and female under each area of concern is necessary in mapping an accurate assessment of women’s full participation in society, access to resources and development. The NGOs surveyed in the Third Sector Report also have urged the Government to centralise and organise the data scattered in different department websites.

Much of the work reviewed is disappointing, although given the paucity of resources for women the fact that there is room for improvement is understandable. For example, a major review of health services delivery gave little attention to gender issues, a missed opportunity given the high use of health services by women and the clear evidence that women’s health requires different approaches than men’s health. An inquiry into attitudes toward working women used emotive words in designing questions, such as whether working women should be allowed to ‘shirk’ household tasks (at least that is the English translation, the original Chinese may have been less biased). TWF hopes that this report will help future researchers avoid this kind of bias and missed opportunities.

For reasons such as lack of resources or lack of access (for example in the case of migrant domestic workers) most studies are limited and employ less than ideal methodology, such as convenient sampling. Some qualitative work exists, but it is rare to see a broadly based quantitative study supplemented by qualitative work. Many surveys use the ‘agree with’ approach, which is ripe for biased wording of the statements or questions. We at The Women’s Foundation believe Hong Kong can do better.

Who is doing the research?

The good news in this report is that many groups in Hong Kong have recognised the value of research. The academy, not surprisingly, accounts for a great deal of research, some of which is a bit, well, academic. Every university in Hong Kong has contributed to research on women and girls. In what we believe is a first, this report includes a review of Masters and PhD theses. Government and quasi-government bodies, most notably the EOC and the WoC, as well as the Sports Development Board and the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, have contributed to the field.

By a rough count, at least 40 independent organisations have conducted research that has been included in this report, and some have undertaken many projects. In some cases, academic research has been published in conjunction with NGOs. Some of this research has been groundbreaking, such as work done by Harmony House, Asian Migrants Committee, Ziteng, the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women, Action for Reach Out, the Federation of Women's Centres and Caritas, to name a few. Every research project is a potential opportunity to learn more about women and girls. Some groups have taken the challenge, despite limited resources, but much more can be done.

What do we know so far?

What we do know is disturbing.

Advances have been made. Women are freer than 50, or even 20 years ago, to choose the paths of their lives. They are more educated, earn more, have more legal protections and live better than ever before. Great changes have been made in some areas, such as the concern over domestic violence and property rights of women. But much more needs to be done.

Most disturbing, and the single most telling result of this review, is that women in Hong Kong do not see discrimination as a social ill that can be changed. Rather, they blame themselves for the limitations placed upon their aspirations and their accomplishments. Without a vision of a better world, and leaders to push for that vision to become reality, change will not happen. Yet when we reflect on the changes that have improved the lives of women and girls in Hong Kong so far, it is clear that change is more than possible. We owe it to every mui tsai, every New Territories woman who lost her right to her home, and every uneducated older woman who gave up school so her brother could go, to continue to push to improve lives of women and girls in Hong Kong.

Leadership, in particular political leadership, is a real problem for women in Hong Kong. We fall well below Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) targets in political representation: 50% by 2005. In 2004, women occupied 18% of the elected members of the Legislative Council; they held 17% of seats in the 2002 District Council. Studies of women managers show a sharp fall off in women at higher levels. The reasons are undoubtedly complex and need much more exploration. We feel the problem is related to the failure of women to see discrimination as a problem amenable to social change, the single most disturbing conclusion of this report. Women cannot see themselves as or be agents of change if they are not in a position to effect change. Economic self sufficiency for women is a topic nibbled at in the research, but not fully developed, as the internationally accepted concept of the feminisation of poverty has not been well explored here. While commonly thought of as a poverty-related issue, economic self sufficiency actually

cuts across all economic and social classes. A middle class wife re-entering the work force after divorce, an elderly woman who never had a pensionable job, a woman whose career is interrupted or blocked by family obligations – all of these women need help in achieving or retaining self sufficiency. Women who successfully pursue independent careers find a glass ceiling thwarts their advance. Despite numerous studies showing a need for family-friendly work policies, few exist. Women and technology is also an area that receives little attention, yet is critical to the future success of women and girls.

Full time homemakers, about 26% of women, appear to be a troubled group in Hong Kong. They are more vulnerable to suicide: fulltime housekeepers are the second most common group in this sad ranking (after the unemployed). They also rank low in knowledge of HIV/AIDS, and in condom use, despite the frightening statistics about the transmission of AIDS and HIV. (In Hong Kong, according to one source, more than 90% of HIV positive women are infected by a long term partner.) Wife abuse is rising, for reasons that are not clear. And when divorced, women in Hong Kong suffer greatly, enduring poverty and stigma. Homemakers are disenfranchised in the functional constituency system. One in twenty women in Hong Kong are new arrivals, and most of these are homemakers in mid-life. Many researchers pay lip service to the burdens on housewives, and their isolation, but few take a hard look at the double burden borne by mid-life women as caregivers for parents and children.

Girls and children in general are an area of great concern and little research. Although children and youth in general attract a lot of attention, even in areas relatively well studied, such as spousal abuse and cross-border marriages, the effects on children, much less on daughters, are ignored. Education research (largely prompted by the EOC) shows us that schools are incubators for sexism and gender stereotyping, but almost no one seems to be asking how to effectively counteract this problem. A fair number of studies look at problems in girls, but few look at causes or at positive aspects of girls. Parenting and the role of fathers are rich areas that need more attention. We seem to rely heavily on women as formal and informal transmitters of culture, yet have little understanding of how the transmission occurs.

Women and the environment is a topic that received no research that we could find. Women touch the environment every day. They use products that affect the environment and they and their children live with the effects of environmental damage. Yet gender aspects of this issue remain unexplored.

Spirituality is an area almost untouched by research, despite the fact that many women are engaged in spiritual activities. The role of church women in the history of the women's movement in Hong Kong has received little attention in the research we found. Further, the role of spiritual organisations in the provision of social services for women does not seem to be addressed. Some religious organisations, such as Caritas, are in the forefront of research for women. Yet religious groups, some data shows, are themselves affected by sexism.

The question for women in society is how to shape (ie make more accurate or less stereotyped) the representation of women and girls in the culture. Unfortunately, in Hong Kong we have so little information about how perceptions of women are formed, that we can barely begin to answer that question. Media, as a culture carrier and an influence

on women and girls has not been studied in depth. We all know that the media are influential, but how exactly? And how to combat those negative influences? These issues need much more thought and attention.

The report provides considerable evidence that women are undervalued in Hong Kong society, as they are in the world. Statistics show that women are underpaid and pushed into low wage and low benefit jobs. Women are the first to lose jobs in harsh economic times. Too many people in Hong Kong accept domestic violence, and too many believe women are incapable of leadership. Too many of Hong Kong's elderly women are lost to us; comparatively they have the highest suicide rate in the world. Every chapter of this report holds data that show how little we care for women and girls.

Summary of report by topic areas

Chapter I:

Perceptions and Self-Perceptions of Women and Girls

The lack of equality for women and girls is rooted in the often subconscious perception that the female half of our community is inferior. Negative female stereotypes, steeped in culture and history, pose obstacles at every turn in a woman's life. They contribute to the practice of unequal employment and promotion opportunities, lesser pay and fewer leadership positions for women. They also tend to devalue the roles of wife and mother. More significantly, women and girls themselves often internalise these stereotypes.

One critical conclusion of the extant research is that Hong Kong women and girls, even when aware of very specific inequalities, such as lower wages for women, are unwilling to ascribe those disparities to discrimination at a societal level. Instead they attribute unfairness to individualised reasons, including their own deficiencies. To implement societal change requires a perception that change is needed for it, something the research indicates that Hong Kong women and girls generally do not endorse (and even less so do men).

Another revelation from the research is how deep and pervasive gender stereotypes are. A groundbreaking study of students by the EOC, done in 2000, shows that children were 'profoundly' influenced by gender stereotypes, affecting every choice from school subject to career. More discouraging, the study finds stereotypes were more firmly held by boys than by girls, further intensifying the challenge to our future women, as future leaders are thus likely to continue to follow the status quo. And of even more concern, a 2003 WoC survey confirms that few people recognised the effects of educational stereotypes: 14% stated that stereotyped attitudes were affected by school life and school textbooks.

Chapter II:

Resources and Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women and Girls

A number of international covenants have been adopted and enabling legislation enacted in Hong Kong, committing the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sex and to ensure the full development and advancement of women and girls in Hong Kong. The goals set by these measures have not been met. For

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example, Hong Kong falls well short of the goal of civic participation of women at a level of 50% by 2005; current levels are below 20%.

Both independent researchers and institutions established to promote the well-being of women and girls report that inadequate resources are being committed to fulfil the undertakings the HKSAR has made. They also report that goals set by the UN are not in fact being met. Institutions designed to benefit women and girls are hampered by a lack of funds. For example, the EOC has identified the lack of resources as a reason it is unable to prosecute more cases. The WoC has urged the third sector to conduct needed research. Funding studies by NGOs argue that resource allocation is a key impediment to the effectiveness of both government and independent institutions in meeting the needs of women and girls.

In many cases, more effective use of resources may be possible, in ways that could be identified by more research. For example, studies conclude that women are missing opportunities for continuing education in part because of schedule conflicts with care-giving obligations, even though the costs of more flexible schedules would not be prohibitive. Similarly, if training programmes for women could move them toward economic self-sufficiency, resources spent to alleviate poverty could be reduced, freeing up funds for more development.

Private resources, such as those from women's advocacy groups, have attempted to fill the gaps, and have developed innovative approaches to problems of women and girls. However they are hampered by a lack of funding. Philanthropic institutions in Hong Kong do not typically fund specifically women's concerns, except in the case of basic needs, such as alleviation of poverty or after school care for children. The role of religious institutions, which provide nearly 40% of social services through subvention, has not been examined in the research. The few studies that exist report a lack of women in authority within these organisations, raising the question whether these attitudes are being transmitted in the services provided.

As noted above, the gap between the demand for education and its availability is large. A fair amount of research has identified barriers to education for women. The lack is especially acute in the area of Information Technology.

The EOC has studied in some detail another gap, that between the need for resources for working caregivers and the resources provided by employers. Women repeatedly cite work/family conflicts as a severe burden on them, yet few employers in Hong Kong provide family-friendly workplace policies. Subtle pressure may discourage workers from taking advantage of policies when they are provided.

In the legal arena, while there are nominal laws on the books protecting some of the rights of women and girls, serious obstacles block the ability of women to enforce those rights. These include lack of access to the courts and lack of information about their rights. Institutions tasked to protect women, such as the police and the judiciary, are hampered by stereotypical attitudes.

Finally, the lack of a women-oriented perspective in the political arena and the bureaucracy has meant that many legislative and regulatory schemes fail to benefit and in some cases inadvertently discriminate

against women. The most notable example is the Mandatory Provident Fund Scheme. Many women activists also see the structure of the WoC and the limited mandate of the EOC as further examples of inadvertent discrimination.

Chapter III: Women in Power and Decision Making

In the last two decades Hong Kong women have increased their participation in the labour force. So too have women and girls made strides in educational attainment, opening doors to better jobs. More women have entered the medical and legal professions, taken up senior positions in government and higher education, started their own businesses, and taken up managerial occupations. Despite this, women still constitute a relatively small proportion of senior management in business, government and the professions.

The rise of women entrepreneurs is to be applauded, and it has benefited both women and the Hong Kong economy. Paradoxically, this phenomenon may also be an indication of the lack of viable careers for women within the corporate world. Women may choose to become entrepreneurs because their achievement is blocked in a traditional environment.

Women's roles as political leaders have not seen much progress in the past decade. Since the establishment of the HKSAR, fewer than 20% of political candidates and elected officials on the Legislative and District Councils have been women. Women as participants in the political process, as voters, campaign organisers and candidates, have not attracted much attention in public political discourse or scholarly research, despite raw statistics that indicate they are politically engaged.

Union representation of women is increasing. However, little is known about the leadership role of women within unions, if any.

A lack of women in leadership positions in other institutions, from the judiciary to charities, philanthropies and the academy, cannot help but feed into the fabric of society, and into our attitudes toward issues as diverse as health, crime, poverty and immigration. Women's representation does indicate a measure of progress and change. For that reason, the EOC has urged the government to use the UN CEDAW resolution as a guide for public bodies to set fair representation targets for their decision-making and policy-formulation levels. Simply increasing the number of women in decision-making roles does not necessarily guarantee improvement in the status of women in general or that women's issues will be given more consideration, since women hold diverse views. However, it is possible to identify issues on which the lack of a woman's perspective played a role, for example the Mandatory Provident Fund.

The reasons for women's slow progress are complex but have much to do with gender stereotypes and subtle mechanisms for advancement, such as intern and mentoring systems, which are less accessible to women for cultural reasons. Gender segregation by occupation, the 'glass ceiling' and the need or perceived need to circumscribe careers to meet family obligations block the advance of women in Hong Kong. Much more research is needed to explore the barriers to women in power in our community.

Chapter IV: Basic Statistics

Overall we can see and project significant demographic changes that will affect women and Hong Kong as a whole in the future. We see an increase in the number of women in Hong Kong, both in absolute terms and in relation to men. Birth rates are dropping dramatically, and longevity of women (and men) is rising, trends that will change the mix of population in the future and put stress on employment. Marriage rates are dropping and divorce rates are rising, meaning that single women will be an increasingly important factor in the community. The role of new-arrival women (one in 20 women in Hong Kong) is also a significant factor in the community.

Chapter V: Immigrants and Migrant Labour'

One in 20 women in Hong Kong is a 'new-arrival', defined as a person who has resided in Hong Kong for a period of less than seven years.

The research collected presents a mixed portrait of new-arrival women. The data debunk some myths about these women. For example, new-arrival women do not have many more children than the average Hong Kong woman. They are about as well educated and do wish to support themselves by working. On the other hand, new-arrival women are subjected to discrimination, and typically find only low paid work with poor working conditions. They have difficulty adjusting to Hong Kong, a region where they cannot even read the road signs. But they do adjust, often seeking out their own networks.

Government services for new-arrival women are not meeting their needs, especially in the area of job and language training, cultural integration, job protection, support networks and housing. Some active NGOs provide services to new-arrival women, including self empowerment programmes. However there is little research to assess the efficacy of these or of government programmes in helping new-arrival women achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Legal migrants are not the only immigrants to Hong Kong. Illegal migrants from the Mainland and from other countries are also in Hong Kong. However, apart from crime statistics on visa overstays and sex work, there is almost no information about illegal migrants.

Part II: Migrant Labour

The most visible and numerous migrants in Hong Kong are female migrant domestic workers.

Hong Kong migrant domestic workers meet the pattern of migration flow from poorer countries to richer countries. They are a unique working population not only because they are predominantly female and ethnically different from their employers, but also because of the live-in nature of their work, which isolates them and makes them especially vulnerable to abusive working conditions.

The research concludes that migrant domestic workers work largely in unfavourable conditions and are excluded from mainstream society. Along the range of the constraints all women face, the domestic worker may represent an extreme that is different in extent but perhaps not in kind. She is placed by economic means and social power in a subservient and dependent position. Contract violations are rampant and abuse is common. The worker-employer relationship is ambivalent: the worker is both an intimate and an outsider of the family, both helping

hand and imagined competitor of some working mothers. The workers are protected to an extent by a standard contract, yet often abused. Even though they are key economic supporters of their own families, distance and time make them strangers to those families. The identity of migrant workers is circumscribed by the law as well as by family and cultural norms; they must establish their own identity and independence both in their home countries and in Hong Kong.

Chapter VI: Marriage and Family

Over the past twenty years, the demographic profile of Hong Kong families has experienced a number of remarkable changes. Birth rates and family size have dropped markedly. The number of single women has increased, as both divorces and the number of women who never married have increased.

One study finds that 78% of female respondents and 87% of males were satisfied with their marriage. However divorce is on the rise and the increase in divorce has added to the number of single-parent families: three-quarters of single parents are divorced or separated. The annual growth rate of the single-parent population is about 5.4%. Research on single mothers, relatively extensive compared to other areas of concern to women, indicates that poverty and stigma are enduring problems for single parents. Government policies, such as in housing, at times exacerbate these problems, by favouring traditional two-parent families.

The average age of marriage and birth of a first child have risen. It might be expected that these changes would affect women's careers (or vice versa) but there has been little examination of this issue.

The reasons for the increasing divorce rate are the subject of speculation with little solid research to shed light on them. Studies of youth suggest that long-term marriage is desired and indeed expected, and studies of adults suggest a high level of satisfaction with marriage as it currently exists. The problems faced by single mothers could be a disincentive to divorce, but this idea has not been tested. Unfortunately we were unable to find an analysis of how and whether divorce and custody laws, religious notions or parental views may facilitate or discourage divorce. Only one study was found that examined the effects of divorce on children. We found no studies on adoption and orphans, or on fertility problems.

Increased contacts with mainland China have created significant changes in Hong Kong. Cross-border employment has split families, causing stress and at times permanent rupture of the Hong Kong family.

While these changes have significantly changed the configuration of marriage and the family in Hong Kong, little is known besides the basic data.

Chapter VII: Girls and Youth

Youth are our future. About 24% of Hong Kong's population are youth (generally age 5 or 6 to 24), a fact with significant consequences for the development of the region. Therefore, attention to their education, well-being and development is critical to the creation of a just and equal society. Researchers recognise this and pay a good deal of attention to youth issues. Few of the studies under review, however, incorporate a gender perspective.

Youth are generally happy, but there are disturbing undertones. Up to one-in-five young people admit to depressive symptoms, some of which are related to confusion or anxiety about sexual identity. Drug and alcohol problems are rising rapidly among Hong Kong youth, and girls are beginning drug use at ever-younger ages. A higher percentage of new drug users under 21 are girls than boys. Unfortunately we know little about what is behind this trend, except that free drugs are often made available to girls in clubs and at rave parties. Girls appear to be more susceptible to peer pressure than boys, and this may suggest that different approaches are needed to help girls resist the temptation of drugs and alcohol.

Girls in Hong Kong are excessively concerned about body image and weight. A shocking 85% of girls believe themselves to be overweight, compared to the less than 5% who actually are. The concerns about body image and weight can be directly associated with girls' exposure to popular magazines and their time spent viewing television and movies.

Although youth claim to be conservative about sexual matters, there is an increasing gap between sexual behaviour and sexual knowledge that could have very adverse consequences for the community.

The role of parents in children's lives is a bit disheartening as less than half of parents spend time interacting with their kids. Few children feel they are free to make their own choices in their extracurricular activities (parents' role in the choice of school subjects also needs more investigation). The potential for parents to play a positive role in girls' lives – and the potential for harm – is an issue the community must consider more carefully.

Chapter VIII: Senior Women and Women in Mid-Life

Aging is a universal phenomenon, with significance for individuals and for communities. But it has unique significance for women for at least three reasons: women live longer, women lose their fertility in mid-life and society views older women more negatively than it views older men.

Like other Asian countries, Hong Kong is experiencing the phenomenon of a 'greying population,' as declines in birth rates and longer life spans lead to a higher proportion of elderly in the population. Most of the aged population is female.

Hong Kong has one of the highest rates of elderly suicides in the world (an average of 31.1 per 100,000 in the period 1981 to 1995), and one of the highest ratios of male to female suicide (1.3:1 compared to the international average of 3:1). Although little is known about why elderly suicide is so high, one study suggests that psychiatric care is inadequate or under utilised, reporting that only a quarter of the suicide victims in Hong Kong had received psychiatric care.

Many of our elderly are impoverished, but the role of poverty in suicide has not been established in research. We do know that elderly women seem to be less likely than elderly men to have acquired material resources. They have less education, are less likely to be married, and are less likely to have had paid work (thus less likely to have savings or a pension). Hong Kong women in mid-life (aged 35-64) have apparently not been considered a group with distinctive characteristics or experiences. Assembling evidence from different areas in this report, we know that housewives, many of whom are in mid-life, are a troubled group. For

example, they have the second highest rate of suicide; they have the highest aspirations for continued education but the least attainment; and those who work suffer stress from work and family conflicts. But only the Women's Commission and a few NGOs, such as Harmony House and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Women Affairs Committee, have seen fit to examine this group, and they do so from quite different perspectives.

Chapter IX: Sexuality

Research indicates that sexual behaviours in Hong Kong are changing: female teenagers are more open to sex than in the past. There is a rise in the percentage of female teenagers who have had dating experience and have become sexually active before marriage. Yet there has been no improvement in sexual knowledge. Some of the most basic information is not well known, such as when a woman is fertile and knowledge about menstruation and intercourse.

Girls and boys have widely divergent views about appropriate sexual behaviour. And because (we suspect) these attitudes are carried forward into adulthood, they may plant the seeds for misunderstanding and dissatisfaction later in life. For example, concerns about seeming to be promiscuous affect women's attitudes toward sex.

That said, there is little known about the intimate lives of Hong Kong adults, with the possible exception of family planning matters.

A study concluding that one in 20 girls surveyed is 'forced' into first intercourse should cause great concern in the community. It is not clear that this finding will be upheld under further study, but it does indicate an area that should be looked into further. Similarly alarming is a report that almost all female participants in an undergraduate focus group had been exposed to exhibitionists, although admittedly the group involved was small and not randomly selected.

Chapter X: Minorities and Special Groups

Ethnic minorities

At the time the research was collected, there was no legal mechanism that protected ethnic minorities against discrimination in Hong Kong. In fact, recent research concerning ethnic minorities in Hong Kong can be viewed as part of increasing awareness of the need for a racial discrimination ordinance, which the Government proposed as a bill in September 2004.

Available statistical data treats ethnic minorities as a single group and has limited gender analysis. Even this limited data indicate both similarities and differences between minority and general populations, and between minority men and women. Data indicate that minority women as a group tend to have lower education levels (although tertiary education attainment was higher among ethnic minorities than in the overall population), higher employment and lower wages than non-minority women, and than men.

Women with disabilities

Although there is some legal protection against discrimination on the basis of disabilities, a landmark EOC study clearly demonstrates that women with disabilities face more obstacles than men with disabilities. They also face more obstacles in access to education, housing, health services and other aspects of daily life than those who are not disabled.

Women with disabilities are also more likely to be unemployed and suffer from poverty. Unfortunately, we do not have a clear picture of the number of people with mental disabilities in Hong Kong. Nor do we have sufficient information about attitudes of Hong Kong people toward people with disabilities.

On the positive side, women with disabilities exhibit a remarkable independence of thought on the role of marriage in their lives and the roles of women within marriages.

Sexual minorities

There is no legal protection in Hong Kong for sexual minorities (ie people with sexual orientations other than heterosexual). As this report was being written, some segments of the community were lobbying for an anti-discrimination ordinance, with still no assurances from the government. Public attitudes toward sexual minorities, when surveyed 10 years ago, were negative. In one of the few studies on this issue, 60% of those surveyed reported enduring discriminatory treatment.

Sex work is not commonly recognised as legitimate employment in Hong Kong. Although sex work is not unlawful in Hong Kong, government policies and public attitudes place sex workers in a vulnerable position. The large number of sex workers who work illegally in Hong Kong, migrants from the Mainland and other areas of Asia, face even more personal risks. In some cases, police and government polices may be increasing risks for these workers, for example by treating carrying condoms as evidence of sex work.

Chapter XI: Education

Education is a gendered experience in Hong Kong. While educational opportunities for females have widened in the past two decades, gender role stereotypes still prevail in every aspect of education. Without further study, however, specific conclusions about the reasons for stereotyping cannot be reached, nor can suggestions be made on how to eradicate the problem.

There is good news. Girls born after 1966 are as likely as boys to attend lower-secondary school. By 2001, more girls than boys had reached the upper-secondary level. Of these children, 18.4% of girls and 15.7% of boys continued to university study.

However, these encouraging numbers mask continued gender segregation in the choice of course of study, as more girls consistently chose the Arts and Humanities while more boys chose Science. The percentage of female students in law, business and social sciences is increasing, but this is offset by a steadily decreasing percentage of male students in arts subjects. Gender segregation in fields of study is well demonstrated, but few studies examine the reasons behind the phenomenon.

Although the influence of teachers has not in fact been examined in depth in Hong Kong, their potential to affect children's gender attitudes has come to light in research (and would seem to be obvious). Like the rest of society, teachers may have gender-stereotyped attitudes, and influence girls (and boys) in subtle ways, for example by encouraging girls to be passive and overlooking boys' aggression. The EOC has found extensive gender stereotyping in textbooks.

Gender segregation is also seen outside the classroom in extracurricular activities. Physical Education in particular is a gendered activity, with the potential consequence that girls are less active throughout their lives.

Sex education, which influences the construction of teenagers' gender role ideologies, is still an elective subject in the school curriculum. It is rarely studied but the work that has been done suggests that teachers lack confidence and training in teaching this subject.

Despite the adoption of CEDAW, gender sensitivity education in the Hong Kong educational context has seen limited implementation. Groups responsible for education exhibit great discrepancies in their understanding of and roles in promoting gender equality to students. They also disagree on an ideal mode of promoting gender equality in schools.

Despite intense pressure, some girls are able to carve out unique identities for themselves. It would be fascinating to track these girls to see how they bring their less traditional identities to bear in their personal lives and careers. No such work in this area has been done.

Chapter XII: Health

The Hong Kong population generally experiences good health. Hong Kong women typically are more health conscious and adopt healthier lifestyles than men. When asked to assess their own health, women generally rank their degree of health lower than men do. Most women also report they are frequently troubled by minor health problems.

Yet women in Hong Kong have a healthier lifestyle than men. They have healthier diets, are less likely to be smokers and consume much less alcohol. The only area in which they are less healthy than men was exercise. Women are more willing than men to change their health behaviours to improve their health or to prevent diseases.

Compared to women in the West, Hong Kong women seem less prone to depression (both general and postnatal). This conclusion is belied, however, by the high rate of suicide among elderly women and housewives. The multiple roles women are required to play add stress to their lives.

HIV/AIDS is an increasingly female problem in Hong Kong and, according to one source, more than 90% of Hong Kong HIV positive women were infected by their husbands or stable partners. Their insufficient knowledge of safe sex, coupled with the inability to insist on condom use, makes them very vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), as well as to unwanted pregnancy. From a public health perspective, this vulnerability may challenge Hong Kong's ability to effectively address the increasing AIDS rate.

Although there are signs that women now hold more egalitarian attitudes in fertility choices and safe sex issues, women continue to defer to men in these areas. Data on childbearing patterns suggest that Hong Kong couples may be using sex selection when planning pregnancies. To address these issues it is critical to understand the role of women in a family's childbearing decisions.

Women generally have passive attitudes when receiving health care, operating from a belief that the medical professional should make all

the decisions. Studies show that women lack sufficient information to make informed medical decisions. However, there are signs that they are beginning to demand greater autonomy and more information on reproductive health services, particularly maternal health services that they receive.

Chapter XIII: Social Welfare and Poverty

The interrelations between women, poverty and social welfare have been a global topic for more than 20 years. Studies consistently show that women worldwide are more likely than men to experience poverty. The 'feminisation of poverty,' a concept first introduced in 1978, acknowledges that women have a higher risk of poverty because of specific obstacles related to their gender in work, family role, education and the social welfare system. In Hong Kong, we see similar risks for women, but we have found no study that looked at the feminisation of poverty in Hong Kong.

'Social welfare' is the system established by government to help people in poverty meet their needs and escape from poverty. However, whether the Hong Kong social welfare system can effectively help the poor is a matter of debate. In Hong Kong, nearly three times as many women as men fall into 'relative poverty' (defined by the United Nations as one half the median personal income), and poverty among women is rising faster than among men.

These striking statistics probably understate the problem of poverty of women in Hong Kong. Many poor women in Hong Kong are simply invisible. For example, Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) statistics are incomplete because not all female-headed single-parent families have applied for CSSA. Women in poverty are hiding from our sight. And if poor women are not visible, it is likely their needs are not met, as the limited available research confirms.

Those studies that examine single mothers conclude that not only were the needs of these women not being met. The programmes were designed to provide relief, not to enable the women to become economically independent. Childcare and job training are not provided. Housing policies severely disadvantage single mothers. Unfortunately, poverty is inherited, and these inadequate programmes do nothing to break the generational cycle.

Women in poverty suffer from low self-esteem, an additional impediment to achieving self-sufficiency. However, studies have shown that poor women can be encouraged and empowered with proper programmes that include social action. Unfortunately, research shows that fear of retaliation (loss of CSSA eligibility) hampers participation in these programmes.

Men and women apply for and terminate social welfare benefits for different reasons, and these differences should be incorporated into social welfare policy.

Chapter XIV: Violence and Domestic Violence

Sexual violence, wife abuse (both sexual and physical abuse) and child abuse are increasing rapidly in Hong Kong, for reasons that have not been fully explored. The rise in abuse may be attributable to increased awareness and the increased willingness of women to seek help, but there is no way to assess the weight of these factors. It remains true that

victims rarely complain, often choosing instead to endure the violence. Victims of domestic violence and child sexual abuse typically wait years before seeking help. Research studies reveal that existing resources are insufficient for abuse victims.

Information about rape in Hong Kong is thwarted by a very low report rate. Police statistics on rape are far lower than data collected by NGOs. We do know that the reported rape rates are rising and that most women and girls are raped not by strangers but by acquaintances. The finding that one in 20 girls surveyed reported that their first sexual experience was forced, if valid, could indicate that the rate of sexual violence may be very high. Domestic violence has been an area of increasing awareness in recent years, thanks to efforts of local NGOs working on domestic violence. Reports of wife abuse have been increasing rapidly. The vast majority of women abused are full time homemakers. The persistence of this problem is shown in studies that profile abusers: men who abuse women simply believe that wife abuse is acceptable.

Two consistent themes that should inform public policy emerge from the research concerning domestic violence. The first is that the public and some members of the judicial system underestimate both the extent and severity of abuse. Violence against women and girls is a hidden problem. Secondly, women who are abused need more help in leaving abusive relationships, starting with provisions for housing and extending to other social services. Most abused women in shelters are mothers who must meet their children's needs as well as their own.

Another disturbing conclusion is that most victims react passively to sexual violence, by avoidance and pretending nothing happened. For example, only 20% of the victims sexually harassed on public transport spoke out and complained. Why women do not protest is not clear, but three other findings may provide insights. First, myths about sexual violence are prevalent in Hong Kong society, such as the myth that most abusers are strangers. Second, most people blame the victim when violence occurs. Third, when abuse such as child abuse is reported to parents or friends, all too often little is done about it.

When it does occur, violence, notably domestic violence, has devastating consequences for women and children. Studies repeatedly confirm the mental and emotional problems abuse causes in women and children. The impact reaches far beyond the family. The abuse tends to be repeated in successive generations, further perpetuating the problem.

School violence has recently drawn attention in Hong Kong. However, only two current research studies highlight girls' participation in and experience of this type of violence. The studies suggest girls are less involved in school violence than boys.

Awareness of elder abuse has been increasing. One report finds more than 25% of elderly respondents reporting abuse. Caregivers are the primary abusers, which may reflect a need for more relief for people (predominantly women) in this role. There has been little gender analysis in this area, other than the simple fact that more elderly are women than men.

There is little information on non-sexual violence against women outside the domestic arena and no conclusions could be drawn in this area.

Chapter XV: Crime and Criminal Justice

The role of Hong Kong girls and women in criminal activities, whether as offenders or victims, has received little attention in official and academic research. Official data shows a rise in female criminality, but little else on the subject is known. Women are somewhat more likely than men to be the victims of non-violent crimes. They also are the primary victims of sexual crimes and domestic violence.

Understanding crime better is key, not only to enforcement (and to assessing the effectiveness of enforcement) but also to getting at root causes of crime. Arrest and incarceration should be only one tool in the social mix of efforts to reduce crime. A careful analysis of the existing policies for combating crime is essential.

A striking and increasing number of females incarcerated are mainland Chinese, who are jailed primarily on immigration and/or sex-related offences. However, because prostitution itself is not an offence in Hong Kong, sex crimes are often prosecuted as related crimes such as soliciting for immoral purposes. The current official statistics do not include prostitution directly. Generally speaking, the law criminalises sex workers, pimps and landlords, but does not target customers.

Chapter XVI: Work, Incomes and Unpaid Work

Women's employment

About 26% of the female population are homemakers, and about the same percentage are students or 'retired'.

Although the employment of women is often perceived as providing only supplementary income, according to one study about 44% of women who work are their family's main source of income. To no woman's surprise, studies show that married women do a higher proportion of the domestic chores than their husbands, whether homemakers or women working outside the home. Married women averaged 4.1 hours per day compared to married men's 1.1 hours.

The Hong Kong government has examined the issue of gender division of labour in the private sector, and found significant segregation. The data show that more than half of women were involved in community/social/personal services. Men's work, on the other hand, was concentrated in the industries of transport/ storage/communication, construction and mining/electricity/gas, in which men comprised more than 70% of the workforce. The implications for income are obvious.

The need to balance work and family obligations seems to be a significant impediment to women who wish to work. Government data suggest that about 22% of homemakers would prefer to work.

Unfortunately, women who work get little help from employers in meeting their family commitments. Nearly three-quarters of surveyed establishments (72%) did not have gender-related employment practices. Among those that did, flexible working hours or practices were the most common practices offered.

Unemployment and under-employment

NGO studies conclude that the high levels of women's unemployment were due to age discrimination and sex discrimination, as well as reasons such as low educational attainment that may also be attributable to discrimination. The surveys also find that women settled for part time

jobs for both structural and personal reasons, such as lack of available full-time jobs, conflict with family responsibilities, and the need to have a paid job, or to keep social ties.

Women have more difficulty than men in finding suitable re-employment. A study concludes that unfavourable labour market conditions after industrial restructuring pushed many women back into domestic life after the recent economic downturn. They determined that more female manufacturing workers were pushed out from full-time employment (57.6%) than male workers (18.4%), statistics that are more dire than those published by CSD.

Incomes

Several women workers' concern organisations that conducted surveys uncovered a much harsher employment situation for women than is shown in official statistics. Jobs were concentrated in labour-intensive lower wage industries. Those able to keep jobs in industry faced under-employment and wage cuts. Those who entered the service sector faced problems of age discrimination, long hours of work, low wages and a heavy workload. Worse, they were challenged by the importation of cheap labour and by younger local workers with higher education. Studies that have looked in detail at vulnerable occupations (very low-income jobs like public housing estate cleaners, dishwashers, domestic workers and shop assistants) have found the wages and working conditions to be very poor.

Conclusions

First, we must convince the community at large that improving the lives of women will benefit the society as a whole.

Second, we must encourage more leadership from women.

Third, women's issues cannot be the sole province of women.

Fourth, we must build on the work discussed in this report to continually learn about women and our community, and to ask meaningful and difficult questions about what is needed.

We refer you to the full report for detailed information and bibliographic information about women and girls in Hong Kong. The report is posted on The Women's Foundation website, www.thewomensfoundationhk.org. Extra copies may be ordered through the website.

“The full participation of women and girls in society is not just an admirable goal, it is vital. In a world facing increasingly complex problems, no community can afford to waste the talent of half its citizens.”

*Boutros-Boutros Ghali,
Former United Nations Secretary General*

