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Statement submitted by Hong Kong Federation of Women’s Centres, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres is a non-partisan and non-religious women's organization in Hong Kong promoting gender equality in Hong Kong through education and advocacy. Through our multi-service women's centres, we develop volunteer networks, provide appropriate services for women, and develop their potential.

3Rs to Improve the Situation of Carers

Women are generally regarded as natural carers and have shouldered a large majority of unpaid work. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified their care-giving burden with a higher standard in hygiene and class suspension with children staying at home. In a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres in late February 2020, among the 850 female carer respondents, 58 per cent of them shouldered the sole responsibility in purchasing face masks and disinfectants for the family whereas only 22 per cent stated that this responsibility was shared among family members. 15 per cent of the respondents rated the highest score of their anxiety level (10) and the average score was 7, a relatively high level.

We reiterate our calls to urge the international community and the member states of the United Nations to strategically address the difficulties faced by carers and improve their situation through Recognizing, Reducing and Re-distributing care work.

Recognize Care Work

It is necessary to recognize the carer's social and economic contribution and make them visible. Unpaid care work is often not counted in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and hence impossible to reflect their economic contributions in a widely-understood way. To recognize care work as work with value and its contribution to the advancement of the society will involve recognizing carers as paid labour with labour rights set out by the International Labour Organization. It will require introducing a carer-orientated policy and allocating adequate social protection for carers and after completion of care duties. Adequate monetary allowance, services to support carers and pension are all important initiatives to support carers and recognize their work as decent work with value and contributions to the advancement of the society. This will also involve recognizing the economic value generated by carers through incorporating their work value in the GDP.

Reduce Care Work Borne by Carers

Care work is the responsibility of all family members and the society and should not be the sole responsibility of an individual. Tradition norms still see women as the primary carers for the family. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the much heavier burden on housework and care for the entire family have posted heavier physical and psychological strain on carers. Not many governments have provided adequate support to carers on healthcare nor community-based care for groups in need such as elderly, chronically ill, disabled or development of children with special education needs, etc. These service gaps are automatically shouldered by carers who are primarily women. The situation was even worsened when many public and social services were unavailable during lockdown. But care work should not only be one person's matter, it should also be the matter of everyone. The society and government should have an active role to provide supportive services to the women and carers as well as come up with alternative care options to reduce the care work of carers, hence releasing the pressure they face.

Re-distribute Care Work

In 1978, American scholar Diana Pearce coined the phrase the feminization of poverty, which has vividly analysed and described the situation of povertization of women in which women are more vulnerable to become the poverty population than men. The situation would be more serious with inappropriate social protection or security policy. The phenomena of feminization of poverty is also applicable to carers, especially to full-time unpaid carers. In Hong Kong, many full-time carers have to spend their savings to pay the bills of caregiving such as travel expenses in escorting the cared for medical appointments. They do not receive an income but in fact are using up their savings. To avoid carers falling into poverty, tangible and intangible resources should be re-distributed to support carers in order to maintain a decent livelihood. One of the strategy is to employ gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment into all policy initiatives and public finances. The gender mainstreaming and assessment processes have to be transparent so that all stakeholders, such as women's groups, are able to contribute to the processes by giving constructive comments and suggestions.

A Fair Chance for Single Mothers

Poverty among single-headed households is common. In 2019, the poverty rate of divorced households was 34.9 per cent in Hong Kong after policy intervention. Among all single-parent families living under poverty, single-mother households constituted 61.6 per cent whereas only 38.4 per cent for single-fathers. Failure to receive maintenance payment is one of the reasons that lead to poverty and mental distress of both adults and children in single-headed households as the process of recovering it can be humiliating and confrontational. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many public services including the Family Court that deals with divorce lawsuits were closed. This caused delays in, among many other things, settling outstanding maintenance claims. Establishing an intermediary body to collect the outstanding maintenance payment from the payer and distribute it to the payee will reduce the difficulties faced by single mothers to receive the maintenance payment that they deserve.

Lack of childcare support is another obstacle on the personal and career development of single mothers, making them vulnerable to poverty. In 2018, more than 60 per cent of single-headed households under the official poverty line had children to take care of, obstructing them to join the labour force. Although single mothers have experienced marital problems and take time to recover, they still have many capabilities and capacities on various aspects once they have a chance to showcase. For instance, the provision of affordable childcare service will release single mothers from caring responsibility and have time to engage in paid employment or academic or vocational studies to further develop themselves.

Eliminate Gender Discrimination in Hong Kong's Housing Policy

Gender inequality remains in Hong Kong's Small House Policy, that allows adult male indigenous villagers in the New Territories to build houses on their owned land without premium payment to the government and apply for grant to build the houses, while female indigenous villagers do not have the same right. Worse still is the announcement in the Policy Address 2021 that the sale restrictions of ancestral land, commonly known as "Tso/Tong land" in villages that are collectively owned by traditional organizations in the New Territories, would be relaxed through further study by a working group formed by the Secretary for Home Affairs with the Heung Yee Kuk New Territories. Again, only male indigenous villagers could make decisions over these Tso/Tong lands. One can foresee that women will again be excluded from

the discussion and negotiation, not to mention to be benefited from, the sale of valuable ancestral lands.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stated, in its Concluding Observations in 2006, that the Small House Policy discriminated women and requested the Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR) Government to “repeal all discriminatory provisions from the Small House Policy and ensure that indigenous women have the same rights and access to property as indigenous men”. We urge the HKSAR Government to comply with the recommendations by CEDAW and ensure equal rights for all regardless of their sex to ensure gender justice.

Recommendations

To alleviate the pressure faced by carers and to prevent single mothers from falling into poverty, we recommend member states of the United Nations to:

1. Introduce carer-based policies that recognize carer’s contribution to the social and economic advancement of the society;
2. Provide adequate and appropriate services and social protection to carers so as to maintain a decent livelihood of carers. This includes but not limited to adequate healthcare, pension, supportive services for the cared;
3. Adopt gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment in all public policy and budget formulation to eliminate gender inequality, and make the process transparent for all stakeholders in the society;
4. Implement supportive measures, such as providing adequate, affordable and assessable childcare services to single mothers and establishing an intermediary body to collect outstanding maintenance payment, so that single mothers could have a chance to develop their career and personal development; and,
5. Deploy additional resource to enhance the support for women and carers according to the UN’s five priorities for a socio-economic recovery from pandemic.
