

February 2, 2023

Mr Paul CHAN Ma-po, GBM GBS MH JP
Financial Secretary
Financial Secretary Office 25/F
Central Government Offices
2 Tim Mei Avenue Tamar, Hong Kong

Dear Mr Chan

RE: The Women's Foundation Response to the Hong Kong Budget 2023-24 Public Consultation

The Women's Foundation (TWF) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls in Hong Kong. We focus on challenging gender stereotypes, increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, and empowering women in poverty.

We are pleased to make this submission in advance of the 2023-24 Budget on recommended areas to increase funding that are critical to address current challenges and inequalities that will not only support the women and girls of our city but bring benefits and opportunities to help Hong Kong prosper as a whole, including our economy.

We are encouraged by the Administration's vision for a results-oriented approach, and its emphasis on building a caring society and maintaining close communication and collaboration with grassroots organisations. We believe that such an approach will help Hong Kong prosper as a whole, and can greatly contribute towards addressing the many forms of gender inequality that still exist in our city.

Gender equality is critical to building and sustaining a thriving society. Having gender equal rights and opportunities, cultivating healthy relationships, and promoting the health, education, safety and well-being of everyone, all contribute to building a solid foundation from which to pursue sustainable economic growth and social development. Research [indicates](#) that China would receive a 11% increase over business-as-usual GDP by closing the gender gap. Thus, gender equality is beneficial for everyone.

Given this, we are pleased to submit a set of recommended funding focus areas to address gender-specific challenges facing women and girls in Hong Kong, which include: poverty, eldercare, workforce participation, gender stereotypes, sexual & domestic violence, vulnerable groups, and research.

As we work towards greater cooperation, dynamism and growth for our city, it is more vital than ever that gender equality, diversity, and the needs of our most vulnerable are kept in mind. We are fully aligned with your vision for a better Hong Kong and extend our support to work together with the Government and other relevant actors to help close these critical gender gaps.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations further and offer our support where appropriate. Please contact my colleague Lisa Moore, Research and Advocacy Director, via email: Lisa.Moore@twfhk.org or phone: +852 9248 8199 for more information or to make arrangements for a meeting.

Sincerely

Signed.

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CC:

Mr CHAN Kwok-ki, SBS, IDSM, JP, Chief Secretary for Administration
Mr Chris SUN, JP, Secretary for Labour and Welfare
Mr Algernon YAU, Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development
Dr CHOI Yuk-lin, JP, Secretary for Education
Mr Christopher HUI, GBS, JP, Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury
Mr SIU Chak-ye, Commissioner of Police
Ms CHAN Yuen-han, GBS, JP, Chairperson, Women's Commission
Mr Ricky CHU Man-kin, IDS, Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission
Dr Donald LI Kwok-tung, SBS, JP, Chairperson, Elderly Commission

2022-23 Budget Recommendations

GREATER SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN POVERTY

Among low income families, there are a few areas that need greater attention particularly for specific groups of vulnerable women who would greatly benefit from additional targeted assistance.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **Vulnerable Women's Relief Fund:** A fund dedicated specifically to financially assisting underprivileged women with a particular focus on single mothers and elderly women
- **A dedicated resource to support economic planning with a gender lens:** Women are [overrepresented](#) in sales and service workers – with industries such as tourism, F&B and hospitality being hit hard over the course of the pandemic, employing a dedicated resource that can advise the Government on ways to adopt a gender lens when formulating the city's economic recovery plan to ensure the adverse effects felt by these women are taken into account
- **Increasing access to technology:** The pandemic highlighted the divide between those with skills and access to hardware and those without, exacerbating the already existent gender gap in STEM. Further funding should be allocated to underprivileged women and girls so that they are encouraged and supported to access STEM and technology through Government subsidised initiatives
- **Strengthen the reach and gender sensitivity of mental health support:** The pandemic has brought mental health to the forefront. According to a global study by CARE, women have been [three times more likely](#) than men to report higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress during COVID-19. It is key all individuals suffering from mental health issues have support and access to the care they need. We recommend that more mental health services, such as counselling, be provided in underprivileged communities through NGOs, the Social Welfare Department's Integrated Family Services Centres, The Hospital Authority's Gender Outpatient Clinic Services, or the Family Planning Association's Women's Clubs.
- **Awareness raising:** Widely promote messages around the importance of caring for mental health (which can still be a sensitive topic among segments of the population), and direct individuals to available free and subsidised mental health resources in languages that meet the needs of Hong Kong's diverse population, particularly marginalised groups
- **Increase funding to services:** Provide mental health services with the financial support they need to meet the growing demand

STRENGTHENING ELDERCARE SERVICES AND CAREGIVER SUPPORT

With the population of eldercare recipients set to more than double from 5% to 11% by 2060, the cost to society will increase by 6 times from HK\$39 billion to HK\$222 billion; the indirect cost of eldercare for employers will increase 4.7 times from HK\$1.8 billion to approximately HK\$8.4 billion; and the overall cost of eldercare to individuals will quadruple from HK\$1.8 billion to HK\$7.2 billion¹. We recommend funding around the development and implementation of policies and practices to alleviate the financial burden on families and employers.

¹ [Eldercare Hong Kong, 2019](#) (HSBC Life, University of Hong Kong, and The Women's Foundation)

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **Societal income insurance mechanism that protects the income of caregivers who need to take a partial/ complete break from work to provide caregiving:** The Government, working closely with the private sector and insurance industry, can explore the possibility of a public-private scheme or set of insurance products that would enable companies and/or individuals to have the option of income protection in the event the employee needs to move to parttime hours or stop work due to caregiving responsibilities. This would ensure that individuals continue their MPF contributions, thus help alleviate financial pressure
- **Capacity building:** Integrate caregiver support in the Government's quality standards for all home care services and professional caregivers. More funding can be allocated towards building greater capacity for carer support service organisations, including providing regular training, learning opportunities and support for family and other caregivers including volunteers and domestic helpers; and share best practices on caregiver support innovations and services
- **Private Sector Subsidies:** Subsidies can be considered for entrepreneurs or business owners looking to establish / expand their eldercare service provisions; create best practice guidelines for the industry; and explore incentivisation schemes to drive growth in this industry
- **Strengthen services for frail older adults:** Review quality standards in care homes, create a centralised and comprehensive solution to subsidised home or respite care, along with on call advice and free support on any legal, emergency, or administrative challenges that caregivers may encounter

INCREASING FEMALE WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

A wholesale approach is needed to address female workforce attrition rates and to support their return to work. At only 54%², Hong Kong's female workforce participation rate lower than its regional neighbours in [Singapore](#) and [Australia](#), which have over 60% participation. Due to caring responsibilities, lack of flexible work and gender biases, we see a significant drop off in women as they move through the workforce pipeline. 30% of Hong Kong working women drop out of the workforce due to caring responsibilities. According to a study [released](#) by the Equal Opportunities Commission in 2018, more than 50% of employers surveyed in Hong Kong stated they would not hire women with children. It's a particularly critical time for Hong Kong's economy – addressing adverse impacts women have faced during the pandemic has been [projected to grow](#) the global economy to US\$13 trillion by 2030, which is 11% more than if economies were to take no gender sensitive actions. Boosting women's workforce participation rate is a significant part of that.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- While we recognise the Government Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged, funding should be allocated to raising awareness of these opportunities and the type of support provided throughout the employment process, particularly among women in vulnerable communities who may lack confidence after an extended break from the workforce

² Hong Kong Census & Statistics Department – Women and Men Key Statistics 2022

- Collaborations with NGOs and businesses to provide training programmes and confidence and leadership building initiatives for marginalised women who are trying to enter / re-enter the workforce
- Alternative solutions to traditional childcare during health crises like COVID-19, with accompanying financial support measures. In other economies this [has taken](#) the form of cash allowances for individuals who need to take work absences due to caregiving responsibilities, policies that provide temporary measures for paid carer's leave, employment protection for unpaid leave due to caregiving responsibilities or virtual childcare services (examples [here](#)).

TACKLING GENDER STEREOTYPES

The Government will be well aware that gender stereotypes are highly prevalent in Hong Kong society from gendered expectations surrounding appearance to career choices and leadership behaviours. From TWF's work and numerous studies, we know that gender stereotypes are exacerbated for both men and women after prolonged exposure. It also contributes body image and self-esteem issues for women and girls, violence against women and the ambition gender gap.

Our research on young men's masculinity in 2021 [showed](#) that 76% of respondents still held deeply conservative and stereotypical views about women, including that women should make less money than men, should take on the majority of caregiving responsibilities and act in ways that are traditionally feminine.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **Review and reform of the current education curricula, which can include:** teacher training on gender equality and gender sensitivity; replacing materials that omit women or tokenise their experiences; taking out gender stereotypical language or examples; and ensure all school libraries feature books with gender diverse content and authors.
 - Listed as one of the top three priorities of the Equal Opportunities Commission, we urge the Government to update and expand the sexual education curriculum in particular, to provide a more holistic education around gender awareness and sex education including understanding consent, contraceptive options, relationships, sexual health, pregnancy and the destigmatisation of abortion and post-abortion care that is age appropriate, evidence-based and addresses the drivers of gender-based violence.
- **Public awareness campaigns:** Work with NGOs, schools and businesses to raise awareness around what form gender stereotypes take, and the negative impact they can have.

ADDRESSING DOMESTIC & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

More than 1 in 3 women in Hong Kong [have experienced](#) sexual violence. Concerningly, Government statistics in 2021 [show](#) a 23% increase in reported rape cases and a 49% increase in indecent assault cases, with an increase of 29% in victims having met their perpetrators online. Victim-survivors face a number of hurdles when trying to report an incident: lack of knowledge on where to seek help, fear of retribution by the assailant, entrenched stereotypes and a culture of victim-blaming and social stigma from the community.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **Public education & awareness:** Raising public awareness around the issue of domestic and sexual violence to tackle stigma and taboos aids both prevention and support efforts. Working with media, transport services, and NGOs familiar with the profile and needs of victims is paramount. We urge the Hong Kong Government via bodies like the Equal Opportunities Commission to lead public campaigns in collaboration with local NGOs over the long term.

Sexual Violence

- **Hong Kong Police Force**
 - **Special Unit:** Add a special unit to the Hong Kong Police Force to handle sexual assault cases that has special training and operates to a code of practice, in line with other jurisdictions such as Australia and Germany
 - **Gender sensitivity and sexual harassment training:** Provide all officers with gender sensitivity and sexual harassment training on a periodic basis to ensure officers are aware of special sensitivities / needs in handling these cases

Domestic Violence

- **Frontline NGO Support:** Given the increase in domestic violence reports during the COVID-19 pandemic (25-30% increase on average³), consider setting aside funds dedicated specifically to NGOs that offer critical domestic and sexual violence services that may experience a significant increase in demand during public health crises
- **Other measures:** Provide funds for subsidised hotel and / or hostel rooms in the event that shelters become at or near capacity as they did in 2020. The Government can allocate funding to subsidise a fixed number of rooms at select hotels for victim-survivors who need this service

Online sexual violence and harassment

- **Education and awareness raising:** Provide funds for NGOs and schools to provide training around media literacy and internet safety to prevent instances of online bullying, harassment or exploitation. Consider funding community classes for adults around these topics as well.

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE GROUPS

Certain groups in Hong Kong have particular vulnerabilities and gaps in addressing critical needs, including ethnic minority women and girls, Migrant Domestic Workers, LGBT+ community, and refugee and asylum seekers.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **Targeted services:** In collaboration with NGOs and other groups, provide targeted services and information around critical areas such as mental health and rights for sexual violence victims, etc to these groups in languages that meet the needs of Hong Kong's diverse populations

³ As [reported](#) by several frontline NGOs in 2020

- **Awareness raising:** In collaboration with NGOs, create public campaigns educating Hong Kong's public about the vulnerabilities of these groups, where further resources or information is available and promoting the importance of non-discriminatory mindset

CONDUCTING CITY-WIDE RESEARCH

There is a paucity of up-to-date and comprehensive research around the gendered impacts of widespread social and economic issues. This reduces the ability of government, businesses, and civil society from being able to fully understand city-wide gaps in gender equality. Investing in research would go a long way towards policies and initiatives that effectively target women and girls, and also accurately identify gaps where further services are needed.

The Government can consider allocating funds for research on:

- **Sexual Violence:** Conduct a territory-wide survey that provides comprehensive publicly available data on sexual harassment and sexual assault, with a view to update this data annually so that NGOs, government departments and other organisations / institutions have a baseline for understanding the prevalence of this issue across demographics
- **Territory wide review of menopause in the workplace:** Given that menopause will affect half of Hong Kong's population at some point in their lifetime and the [adverse effects](#) the lack of awareness on menopausal symptoms can have on workplace retention, particularly at senior levels, consider conducting territory-wide research to better understand the types of challenges menopausal women are facing and determine the best resources needed to support them
- **Gender & COVID-19:** Conduct a comprehensive review around the current and potential long term gendered impacts of COVID-19 including employment, mental health and online harassment, among other factors. This will contribute towards identifying a proactive policy and services approach for future public health crises.