



January 27, 2022

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 2022-23 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 2022-23 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.

With the continued effects of COVID-19, Hong Kong is facing challenges both short and long term. Women have been disproportionately impacted by this crisis – juggling extra care responsibilities, being more vulnerable to financial instability, and are at increased risk for domestic violence. We are particularly concerned that these factors will adversely impact an already low female workforce participation rate of 53.6% if they are not addressed^[1]. Given this, it is critical that Hong Kong focus on retaining, supporting and developing its human capital talent.

We welcome the support measures put forward in the Policy Address last October, particularly around enhanced childcare and eldercare services, childcare subsidies for the underprivileged, and Government-provided MPF contributions for low income workers, among others.

To supplement and add on to these areas, 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: domestic and sexual violence, poverty, eldercare, gender stereotypes, and research.

We know challenges brought on by COVID-19 are opportunities for inclusive economic growth that benefits everyone. McKinsey & Company have [projected](#) that if the higher negative impact of COVID-19 on women was addressed, the global economy would grow US\$13 trillion by 2030, which is 11% more than if economies were to take no gender sensitive actions. Their research also shows that by investing greater amounts in areas women particularly need support – including digital inclusion and unpaid care work – yield economic benefits that are 6-8 times higher than the social spending

needed.

As we work towards revitalising our city and economy, it is more vital than ever that gender equality, diversity, and the needs of our most vulnerable are kept in mind. We look forward to working together with the Government and other relevant actors to help close these 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 virtual meeting.

Sincerely

Signed.

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CC:

Mr John LEE Ka-chiu, SBS, PDSM, PMSM, JP - Chief Secretary for Administration
Dr LAW Chi-kwong, GBS, JP - Secretary for Labour and Welfare Department
Mr Edward YAU Tang-wah, GBS, JP - Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development
Mr Kevin YEUNG Yun-hung, JP - Secretary for Education
Ms CHAN Yuen-han, GBS, JP - Chairperson, Women's Commission
Mr Ricky CHU Man-kin, IDS - Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

2022-23 Budget Recommendations

ADDRESSING DOMESTIC & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

1 out of 7 women in Hong Kong will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime and 9 out of 10 will not report the incident^[2]. 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.

There is also the issue of domestic violence, which frontline NGOs [noted](#) increased 25-30% during the height of social distancing measures in 2020. While updates on these figures are currently not available, given the fluctuation in the severity of COVID-19 and accompanying change in Government measures, it would be prudent to assess what further funds can support these critical services.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

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
 - **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
- **Public Campaigns:** Collaborate with NGOs and other relevant organisations to promote public campaigns to encourage more positive conversations to support victims collectively and bystanders to help to overturn the cultural taboo and social stigma placed on victims

Domestic Violence

- **Frontline NGO Support:** Set aside funds dedicated specifically to NGOs that offer critical domestic and sexual violence services that may be experiencing increased volume particularly under the pandemic
- **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 individuals who need this service. Additionally, developing emergency warning systems linked to dedicated resources such as code words at [supermarkets](#) and [pharmacies](#) to report domestic and sexual violence that are localised to the Hong Kong context would enable greater numbers of victims (or those at high risk of being a victim) to gain access to needed support
- **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.

GREATER SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN POVERTY

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequalities, and there are several groups of women in poverty who have additional vulnerabilities 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 adversely impacted by COVID-19 with a particular focus on single mothers and elderly women
- **A dedicated resource to support economic planning with a gender lens:** 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 women’s specific needs are taken into account
- **Increasing access to technology:** The pandemic has increased reliance on technology and 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
- **Gender sensitive mental health resources:** 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.
 - o **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
 - o **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 billion^[3]. We recommend funding around the development and implementation of policies and practices to alleviate the financial burden on families and employers.

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 part-time 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:** Creating 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 53.6%, 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. Other women face discrimination when looking for employment. 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

- 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

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.

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. With specific regards to the sex education curriculum, in an Equal Opportunities Awareness Survey 2021 by the Equal Opportunities Commission, respondents [noted](#) this as one of their top three areas of concern. Recent research from think tank Ming Wai Youth Office (MWYO) [reveals](#) that sex education among secondary school students has actually deteriorated. We urge the Government to update and expand it to be in line with international best practices that are age appropriate, evidence-based and addresses the drivers of gender-based violence

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE GROUPS

Under the pandemic, certain groups of women faced particular issues. Migrant Domestic Workers [reported](#) higher levels of discrimination and unfair working conditions; sexual minorities [noted](#) increased levels of anxiety and depression that went beyond general COVID-19 stressors; increasing numbers of ethnic minority girls [faced](#) forced marriage to men overseas; and refugee and asylum seekers who face domestic violence (which is estimated by one frontline NGO to be nearly half of the population they work with during COVID-19) do not have access to most shelters or support resources available to residents.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **Targeted services:** Provide targeted services and information promotion to these groups in languages that meet the needs of Hong Kong's diverse populations
- **Awareness raising:** In collaboration with NGOs, create public campaigns educating them 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
- **Gender & COVID-19:** Conduct a comprehensive review around the gendered impacts of COVID-19 including employment, mental health and online harassment, among other factors
- **Review:** Conduct a comprehensive review of women's issues and gender equality across sectors and communities in Hong Kong

REFERENCES

^[1] Hong Kong Census & Statistics Department (2021 data), Table 7 : Labour Force and Labour Force Participation Rate - By Sex

^[2] Women's Coalition on Equal Opportunities, '[Survey on Hong Kong Women's Experience of Sexual Violence](#)' 2013

^[3] HSBC Life, Sau Po Centre on Ageing at the University of Hong Kong and The Women's Foundation, '[Eldercare Hong Kong](#)', 2019