



January 25, 2020

Mr Paul CHAN Mo-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 2021-22 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 2021-22 Budget on recommended areas to increase funding that are critical to address the immediate and longer term challenges and inequalities that women and girls face, and benefit Hong Kong as a whole, including our economy.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, women have been disproportionately impacted by this crisis – comprising the majority of front line health and essential workers, juggling extra care responsibilities, being more vulnerable to financial instability, and are at increased risk for domestic violence. These critical issues compound the existing challenges facing women and girls in Hong Kong. We are particularly concerned that these factors will adversely impact an already low female workforce participation rate of 55% if they are not addressed<sup>1</sup>. At this pivotal point it is critical that Hong Kong not only retain, but develop, its human capital talent.

We welcomed support measures put forward in the Policy Address last November, particularly around enhanced childcare services, support for lower income groups and the unemployed, increased resources to raise awareness around mental health and strengthen related services, and schemes to attract more talent into residential homes and care centres to support elderly populations, 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

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<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong Census & Statistics Department (2019 data): Table 1: Summary of Key Statistics



unpaid care work – yield economic benefits that are 6-8 times higher than the social spending needed.

As we begin economic recovery efforts and strengthen our position as a world-class city, it is more vital than ever that gender equality, diversity, and the needs of our most vulnerable are kept in mind to both address inequalities and support the economic growth of our city. 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 guidance where appropriate. Please contact my colleague Lisa Moore, Research and Advocacy Director, via email: [Lisa.Moore@twfhk.org](mailto:Lisa.Moore@twfhk.org) or phone: +852 9248 8199 for more information or to make meeting arrangements.

Sincerely

Signed.

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## 2021-22 Budget Recommendations

### PROVIDING COVID-19 SENSITIVE SOLUTIONS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS

Frontline service NGOs have reported a 25-30% increase in calls to domestic and sexual violence hotlines since the start of COVID-19 social distancing measures. This is likely due to a combination of factors including higher stress levels, being forced to spend prolonged periods with their perpetrators, and limited access to support services all contributing to the increased vulnerabilities victim-survivors face amid COVID-19. With potential loss of employment and financial stability contributing to household tensions, domestic violence spikes may continue.

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **Frontline NGOs:** More funding to NGOs that offer critical services to individuals experiencing domestic and sexual violence
- **Subsidised hotel and / or hostel rooms:** With the increase in individuals seeking temporary shelter, this has led to shelters being at near capacity. Often shelters are structured so that some facilities like bathrooms and kitchens are shared, which increases the risk for COVID-19 infection and spread. Due to the limitations on tourism, hotels and hostels currently have availability. The Government can allocate funding to subsidise a fixed number of rooms at select hotels for individuals who need this service, which would be a helpful alternative should shelters not have availability and / or the space to effectively protect against the spread of COVID-19.
- **Public education & awareness:** Raising public awareness around the issue of domestic and sexual violence to tackle stigma and taboos and therefore aid both prevention and support. Working with media, transport services, and NGOs familiar with the profile and needs of victims is paramount. We urge the Hong Kong Government to lead such a public campaign in collaboration with local NGOs.
- **Publicity of hotlines and social service support:** With the increased use of hotlines, greater publicity is needed to provide information about social service hotlines and available support services in multiple languages to ensure universal accessibility. This information can empower and provide support to those at risk of domestic and sexual violence.
- **Other initiatives:** Developing emergency warning systems linked to dedicated resources such as code words at [supermarkets](#) and [pharmacies](#) to report domestic and sexual violence and seek support that are localised to the Hong Kong context.

### ADDRESSING 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<sup>2</sup>. 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.

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

The Government can consider allocating funds for:

- **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.

### GREATER SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN POVERTY

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequalities and there are some groups of women in poverty who have additional vulnerabilities. [Single mothers](#) far outnumber single fathers and earn less than the average income. Already disproportionately below the poverty line, they will have less of a safety net to fall back on. Sectors adversely impacted by COVID-19 are primarily [female dominated](#), and with over a third of single mothers working in the retail sector, they will be at high risk of unemployment and must have support.

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:**
  - **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 billion<sup>3</sup>. 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 units, 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 55%, Hong Kong's female workforce participation rate lower than its regional neighbours: 70% in [Japan](#) and 60% in [Singapore](#) and [Australia](#). 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 is 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

<sup>3</sup> HSBC Life, Sau Po Centre on Ageing at the University of Hong Kong and The Women's Foundation, '[Eldercare Hong Kong](#)', 2019 (report also included as an attachment)

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:

- **Return to work schemes for women** who may have dropped out of 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
- **Child care support services** to enable women to enter / re-enter the workforce, with a particularly those in vulnerable groups, and provide alternative solutions to traditional childcare during health crises like COVID-19

### 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, 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.

### CONDUCTING CITY-WIDE RESEARCH AND IMPROVING DATA

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. Related to this, the available data and the methods by which the Government is collecting and classifying it for women in particular are outdated and need a wholesale revision. Reformulating the questionnaires and data collection methods in a way that data can be disaggregated by gender, making measures consistent across all departments and pairing that with clear objectives, regular tracking and transparent, comprehensive reporting measures within all government departments, bureaus, and other relevant organisations 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 to support data collection as outlined above and further allocate funds to research areas:

- **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 and mental health, among other factors.
- **Review:** Similar to [Singapore](#), conduct a comprehensive review of women's issues and gender equality across sectors and communities in Hong Kong.
- **Data collection improvements:** Track gender disaggregated data around critical areas such as the uptake of subsidies for parents, single parents and informal care givers, and access to mental health services, among others.