

**Commission on Strategic Development  
Committee on Social Development and Quality of Life**

**Support for the Family**

**I. Purpose**

This paper outlines the major characteristics and issues encountered by families in Hong Kong; and invites Members to discuss the strategic direction and strategies on promoting support for the family.

**II. Background**

2. Family is generally accepted as the key place for providing social care and the basic unit of a society. Harmonious family relationship is one of the keys to building up social harmony. It is also the seedbed for nourishing socially responsible citizenship and a cohesive society. It is therefore important for the government and the community to give priority to supporting the family. On the other hand, it should be duly recognised that family is also one of the most personal social space that should be safeguarded. Public support for the family should not become too intrusive to family affairs nor should it be used as a means of social engineering. For the purpose of this paper, we broadly refer to the family, adopted by the United Nations, as a social unit / organization of kinship formed by marriage, blood, or adoption<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Family Indicators, 2003

### III. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the Hong Kong family<sup>2</sup>

3. The characteristics of the Hong Kong family have been changing considerably over the years, reflecting socio-economic and demographic changes of Hong Kong. A broad changing profile for the Hong Kong family is highlighted at Annex I and below:

- growing predominance in family with one unextended nucleus<sup>3</sup> which has increased from 61.6 % in 1991 to 66.2% in 2001 of the total number of families in Hong Kong;
- reduction of average family size from 3.3 in 1996 to 3.0 in the second quarter (Q2) of 2006 mainly as a result of increase in nuclear family, reduction in number of children per family, increase in the elderly population living alone or in residential institutions<sup>4</sup>;
- increase in single-parent<sup>5</sup> family partly due to increase in divorce cases. The number of this group of family with children aged less than 18 also increased from 2% (42 190) of the total number of families in 1996 to 3% (78 800) in Q2 2006;
- increase in new-arrival family members from the Mainland to Hong Kong. A total of 525 234 Mainlanders have arrived Hong Kong between 1996 to 2005;

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<sup>2</sup> There is a lack of precise official statistics on family in Hong Kong. The Census & Statistics Department uses “domestic household” as the unit of data collection. A domestic household is defined as a group of people to live together and share living necessities. They may or may not have kinship relationship. Nevertheless, they should be a very good proxy of reflecting family pattern in the Hong Kong context. In this paper, figures on the characteristics of families generally refer to estimates of the characteristics of domestic households.

<sup>3</sup> One unextended nuclear family refers to a household comprising one family nucleus without other related persons. A family nucleus is a married couple without children, a married couple with one or more never married children, or one parent (either father or mother) with one or more never married children.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the institutionalization **rate** of the elderly population and the number of institutionalised elders has been quite steady over recent years.

<sup>5</sup> Single parents are defined as mothers or fathers who are widowed, divorced or separated, with child(ren) aged under 18 living with them in the same household. There are some domestic households with two or more single parents living together.

- increase in family violence cases. The reported cases (child and spouse abuses cases) have increased by 117% between 2001 and 2005; and
- increase in dual-income families, whilst at the same time increase in number of families with both parents being economically inactive. The number of couples with children aged under 18 and both being employed was 344 900 in Q2 2006, compared with 315 700 in 1996. The number of couples with children aged under 18 and both being economically inactive increased from 12 600 in 1996 to 25 200 in Q2 2006.

#### **IV. Major issues encountered by the family**

4. The changing family characteristics have evolved to many different forms of families, including nuclear, single-parent, childless couples, dual-income family, etc. As a result, the traditional family system is under considerable stress. Coupled with the economic downturn in earlier years, the changing education system, the weakening of family value and solidarity etc., concerns have been raised on the weakening of family functions, deterioration of quality of family life, increasing stress to family, culminating crises to family violence and abuses, etc. In many cases, family problems do not happen as a single issue unless addressed promptly and properly. It is common to our experience that the problems always overlap with each other. Family problems could easily deteriorate and become multi-problems causing different level of distress to families. The worst case is to turn the family into a place of violence and tragedy. However, it should be emphasised that members of different forms of families could still live in a happy and harmonious manner. The key is whether family members know how to share and live with each other with love and care.

5. The following paragraphs discuss major issues encountered by our families.

(a) *Weakening of family support*

6. The growing predominance of nuclear family, increasing number

of single-parent family, and singleton elderly household (**Annex 1**) appears to support the popular view that the traditional Chinese family values of respecting parents, supporting older generation family members such as parents' livelihood, mutual support among family members, etc. have eroded considerably in the community. The preference for privacy and personal choice of lifestyle among our younger generation has further diluted traditional family values. Another study has, however, observed that the Chinese family values are still in practice, though modified to adjust to changing socio-economic circumstances. Through the modified extended family system<sup>6</sup>, parents, brothers and sisters, adult children, etc. are still maintaining active, close, and mutually supportive interaction and relationship among their members.

7. The changing family structures do have major social consequences of weakening the cohesion of the family as an institution. The caring for the elderly is moving significantly towards the community instead of relying on the traditional approach of family support. There is a significant increase in singleton elderly households and elderly living in residential institutions. In 1996, about 35,000 elderly lived in residential institutions, and it increased to 68,000 in 2001. However, this has to be interpreted with care against the backdrop of our ageing population. Frail elders may require round-the-clock residential care services and can no longer be adequately taken care of at home at some stage because of their physical conditions. It does not mean that once they are institutionalized, they are no longer cared for or supported by their families. In the foreseeable future, such trend would lead to a significant increase in public spending on elderly care. For the single-parent family and dual-income family, a commonly cited major difficulty is obtaining readily accessible extended childcare and after-school care services in their community or near their workplaces so as to facilitate them to be released for engaging in employment.

(b) *Family and work imbalance*

8. There are more and more working parents and there is a growing

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<sup>6</sup> Lee Ming-kwan, "Organisation and Change of the Chinese Families in Hong Kong", in Hong Kong Politics and Society in Transition. Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1987. Pp153-178. (in Chinese)

tendency of parents working long hours, or having to work across the boundary. This raises the issue of work and family balance that may affect the physical and mental health of working parent(s), quality of family life, relationship among family members, caring of children and other family members, and readjustment of men and women's role in family.

9. To address the family and work balance issue, there have been calls for promoting a family-friendly employment practices in the local community as in other parts of the world. Western countries, such as Sweden, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, USA, etc., have moved quickly towards family-friendly practices such as flexible work arrangements, leave benefits, and employees' assistance programmes. Relatively speaking, family-friendly practices in Hong Kong is still in the early stage and at a rather modest scale<sup>7</sup>.

(c) *Domestic violence*

10. Domestic violence cases, in particular child abuses and spouse battering, are seemingly on the rise over the years (**Annex 2**). According to a household survey conducted in 2003-04, about 4% of the child respondents indicated they had experienced severe physical assault by their parent(s), whereas about 2% of respondents were physically injured by their spouses<sup>8</sup> during the 12 months prior to enumeration. The upsurge of domestic violence cases and the occurrence from time to time of some serious homicide/suicide cases relating to domestic violence have aroused tremendous public concern. Domestic violence is a multi-faceted problem. The factors and dynamics associated with domestic violence are extremely complex. The more common risk factors amongst those who used violence as identified by researchers include low self-esteem, lack of empathy, alcohol or drug addiction, a history of abuse and neglect as a child, social isolation, family problems or stress etc.

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<sup>7</sup> Siu Oi-ling, Work-family balance : Prevalence of Family – friendly employment policies and practices in Hong Kong, (a research commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Women's Commission), 2006 (to be published) (quoted in the publication of the Conference on Strengthening Hong Kong's Families – Awareness, Commitment and Action – Good Practice and Research Projects from Various Sectors, organized by Women's Commission, Central Policy Unit, HKSAR Government, and HKU Family Institute.)

<sup>8</sup> Chan, K L, Study on child abuse and spouse battering : report on findings of household survey [A consultancy study commissioned by the SWD of the HKSAR], Hong Kong : Department of Social Work & Social Administration, HKU, June 2005

11. Whilst there is a strong consensus in the community that domestic violence should not be tolerated, the challenge for the community is how it could be prevented and dealt with promptly to give support to the victims. A recent survey suggested that children who are victims of physical maltreatment tend to manage their anger violently and become more aggressive to others. The perpetrators of child physical maltreatment would also have a higher tendency of spouse battering. At the same time, perpetrators of child physical maltreatment are also more likely to be victims of spouse battering<sup>9</sup>. The above highlights the importance of early identification and intervention of family under stress to break the cycle of domestic violence.

(d) *Other Concerns*

12. There are also concerns in the community about specific types of family, including:

- (i) Single-parent family - Depending on the financial and social resources available to them, from a welfare perspective, single-parent families may require support and assistance, in areas concerning financial resources, accommodation, employment, and child care services. Some may face other problems, such as restrictive social support network and emotional adjustments for themselves and their children<sup>10</sup>.
- (ii) Dual-income earners family - There is a general impression that dual-income families are concerned about child-care needs and work/life balance, especially in the realm of family-friendly policies. For dual-income families with children, they share the concerns of the other families with children about the overall cost of raising a child in Hong Kong, and the quality of the environment in which their children grow, especially education.

(iii) low income family – there is an increasing number of families

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<sup>9</sup> Chan, K L, Study on child abuse and spouse battering: report on findings of household survey [A consultancy study commissioned by the SWD of the HKSAR], Hong Kong : Department of Social Work & Social Administration, HKU, June 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Report on the Review of Family Services in Hong Kong, “Meeting the Challenge: Strengthening Families [A consultancy study commissioned by SWD of the HKSAR], Department of Social Work & Social Administration, HKU, June 2001.

with both parents being economically inactive. For single-parent family and family with new arrivals from the Mainland (less than 7 years)<sup>11</sup>, more parents are also becoming economically inactive. The labour force participation rates (LFPR) of single parents decreased from 72.2% in 1996 to 63.7% in 2001. The number of economically inactive single parents increased from 11 800 persons in 1996 to 21 200 persons in 2001. For family with new arrivals from the Mainland, the LFPR of parents also decreased from 69.9% in 1996 to 62.5% in 2001. The corresponding number of economically inactive parents increased from 35 100 persons in 1996 to 69 200 persons in 2001. A major concern is their lack of adequate financial and other resources in supporting their children for personal development such as to participate in extra-curricula activities, or acquiring education-related equipment, etc.

- (iv) Integration of family with new-arrival members from the Mainland with the mainstream society – Since 1997, over 464 000 Mainlanders have arrived in Hong Kong through the One-way Permit Scheme. Concerns have been raised about the new arrivals that they are more vulnerable to financial hardship, have difficulty in entering into local job market or adapting to the mainstream society and school systems, etc. A survey carried out by the Census & Statistics Department in 2003 indicated that some 10.5% of persons from the Mainland having resided in Hong Kong for three years and less had encountered difficulties in getting along with Hong Kong residents in general.
- (v) Integration of ethnic minority families into the mainstream society – In 2001, there were about 343 950 persons who belonged to ethnic minority<sup>12</sup> groups, about 5.1% of the total population. The ethnic minority families have cultural background and languages different from our local community. Little is known about the social needs and the difficulties of their integration into the society. Concerns have been raised on the social isolation of this family group from the mainstream society

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<sup>11</sup> Family with new arrivals from the Mainland (less than 7 years) refer to the family with ever married persons living with child(ren) aged under 18, of which at least one of the parents or the child(ren) aged under 18 are new arrivals from the Mainland.

<sup>12</sup> Ethnic minorities refer to persons of non-Chinese ethnicity. The ethnicity of a person is determined by self-identification; normally on a social and cultural basis.

due to the language and cultural barriers. Their parents have only limited social support to handle their child caring, pre-school education, in their formative years, and employment issues.

- (vi) Support for family affected by cross-boundary living – The close socio-economic interaction between Hong Kong and the Mainland have resulted in a large number of Hong Kong families having their parent(s) staying in the Mainland to work, involving marriage with Mainlanders, or being relocated to the Mainland, in particular in Shenzhen but with their children or their spouse still studying or working in Hong Kong. From time to time, concerns have been raised to call for better support to these groups of families that are susceptible to various stresses and crises mentioned in earlier paragraphs.

## **V. Our Current Efforts**

13. The Government cherishes that family harmony is the foundation of social harmony and continues its efforts to enhance family cohesion. Hence, a number of bureaux and departments are working together to enhance family harmony. The Government also emphasises the importance of all family members to share their responsibilities in building a healthy family relationship. As family issues touch upon a wide spectrum of the community, it also needs the active support from different sectors of the community, in particular the business sector, to build up a social environment conducive to family harmony.

### *(a) Promoting family harmony and cohesion*

14. On promoting family harmony and cohesion, the Government endeavours to promote the importance of family, family values and ethics, and individual responsibility needed for family harmony in the community through family education. An inter-departmental working group headed by the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau has been set up to strengthen family education through different means, including mass media and organising local activities. As a continuous effort, schools, integrated family service centres, non-government organisations, maternity care centres, district offices, etc. also participate in promoting family education, strengthening family values, and supporting family functions. The



Education and Manpower Bureau through the Committee on Home-School Cooperation also supports school authorities to promote parents education.

(b) *Promoting family-friendly environment*

15. The Government has introduced various supportive measures to promote a family-friendly environment. A notable measure is the tax system to provide allowances for taxpayers taking care of their children, parents and grandparents, and concessions to single parents and carers of family members, especially to those with disabled family members. The public housing allocation system also gives special consideration to tenants looking after elderly family members. To support working parents, in particular the dual-income earners family, the Government also subsidises a number of flexible childcare for children at the age of 0 - 6 and encourages non-governmental organizations to run after-school care services for young children at the age of 6 - 12. To promote a community spirit and achieve a high degree of flexibility, most of the services are provided through non-profit making agencies, including district organisations, women bodies, etc. to meet the diversified needs of the working family. Family, through a means test, could also apply for fee assistance of the services.

(c) *Promoting family-friendly workplace environment*

16. On promoting a family-friendly environment in workplace, the Employment Ordinance sets out the statutory leave entitlements and protections for workers. Furthermore, the Government seeks partnership with the business community and social service agencies to explore ways to help working parents achieve a better family-work balance so they can upgrade the quality of their family life. For instance, the Social Welfare Department subsidizes the annual “Caring Company Scheme” organized by the Hong Kong Council for Social Service to encourage companies to adopt practices to care for their employees’ family. Other notable efforts include establishment of the Employees Assistance Programme to provide employees with professional personal advice and counselling services to help them manage stress and emotional problems. The Labour Department also encourages employers to adopt good human resource management practices to help employees in achieving a better family-work balance such as introducing flexible working hours, etc. Firms are also encouraged to provide staff with child care services to meet the needs of working parents. In this respect, the Government also introduced the “Five-day week” scheme in July this year. This would be conducive to

promoting a family-friendly environment in workplace.

*(d) Supporting family under stress*

17. To support family under stress, the Government welfare policy aims to assist individuals and family to prevent and address problems, and to provide assistance to family that could not meet their needs on their own. There are 61 integrated family service centres (IFSCs) in the territory to provide families in need a series of preventive, supportive and remedial services of extended hours. The IFSCs also adopt a proactive approach to outreach targeted family and to form networks with related service agencies to refer, identify and support family under stress. In doing so, it will be able to provide services to the family under stress in a prompt and responsive manner.

18. Recently, the Government has further introduced a Family Support Programme to outreach family that have not sought help to address their problems at an early stage. The outreach programme makes use of telephone contacts, family visits, and other outreach services to encourage family under stress to accept supportive services in the community. A community participation and networking strategy has also been adopted to train up volunteers and those who had similar personal experience to outreach and offer help to the family concerned.

*(e) Tackling domestic violence*

19. The Government does not tolerate domestic violence and strives to protect victims of domestic violence, in particular women and children. Since 2004, the Government has taken specific measures and devoted more resources to support family in need and to resolve family crises. A more coordinated and multi-disciplinary co-operative approach of engaging social workers, police, and non-government organizations has been adopted to improve the district welfare planning and co-ordination systems in caring for family in need. Allocation of resources would be more attuned to the different situations in each district. For instance in Tin Shui Wai, an additional Family and Child Protective Services Unit has been set up and an integrated children and youth services centre will also be established to meet the specific district need. Other notable measures have also been in place to prevent and combat domestic violence. They include strengthening clinical psychological counselling and training of social workers and other related professionals, enhancing support for refuge

centres for battered women and providing more foster home places for children, launching of two pilot projects of batterer intervention programme from March 2006 to March 2008, strengthening public education, etc.

(f) *Specific groups of family*

20. Apart from above, the Social Welfare Department has developed a comprehensive network of welfare services to cater for family needs through its family and child welfare services and provision of a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services. Other groups of families with individual needs are also taken care of through specific programmes. For example, the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme is designed to provide a safety net for individuals or families who are unable to support themselves financially because of age, disability, illness, low earnings or unemployment. The Home Affairs Department coordinates services within the Government and partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate the early integration of new arrivals into the local community. A central coordination machinery, district level committees as well as a forum to maintain close regular contact with NGOs have been set up to monitor the effectiveness of the new arrival services provided. On helping ethnic minority family, the Home Affairs Bureau started a pilot programme of Community Support for Ethnic Communities in April 2006, providing sponsorship for the establishment and operation of a Pakistani service team and a Nepalese service team for an initial period of two year. The teams are operated by their respective ethnic minority community groups and the Pakistani team is in partnership with an experienced NGO. Both teams offer a range of services to members of their own communities in their own languages and in a culturally sensitive manner.

## **VI. Strategic issues for members' consideration**

21. The Government has put in place a series of measures and services to support family from promotion of family harmony and cohesion, promoting a family-friendly environment, to handling family under stress. Targeted services to support specific groups of family are also provided with a view to serving family in need in a responsive manner. Nevertheless, views in the community have been expressed from time to time to call for more specific actions to further strengthen family support. They include, amongst others, suggestions to establish a committee and a

family impact assessment system to ensure policies and practices have a proper family perspective in mind; to review the Domestic Violence Ordinance to enhance the victims' protection; to introduce parental leave; to provide new born baby tax concession; to encourage local community organisations / non-government organisations to provide more services, in particular extended childcare services after school / office hours and on weekends in their neighbourhood; to strengthen the coordinating roles of HAD and SWD in supporting family at district level, etc.

22. Against the above background, Members are invited to consider the following strategic issues:

- (1) What are the key challenges encountered by our family in the midst of changing socio-economic and demographic changes of Hong Kong?
- (2) Hong Kong is a free and open society. Citizens are free to make choices and decisions on family matters. In these circumstances, what should be the role of Government, community, and individuals in supporting family?
- (3) What are the priority issues and actions that should be taken by the Government, business sector, NGOs alone or together to strengthen the support for family:
  - (a) in promoting family harmony and cohesion;
  - (b) in promoting a family-friendly workplace environment;
  - (c) in supporting family under stress, in particular handling family violence?
- (4) What further actions should be initiated to strengthen the capacity and to mobilise the potential of neighbourhood and local community resources in providing family support?

Secretariat to Commission on Strategic Development  
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**Annex 1 : Changing Broad Family Profile in Hong Kong**

Broad family profile	1991	1996	2001	2006
1. Total number of domestic households (proxy families)	1 582 215	1 855 553	2 053 412	2 313 800
(a) One person households	233 923	276 906	321 111	357 100
(b) Households with single parents	32 871	42 190	58 119	78 800
(i) One unextended nuclear family households	21 699	31 622	47 022	N.A.
(ii) Others	11 172	10 568	11 097	N.A.
(c) Households without single parents	1 315 421	1 536 457	1 674 182	1 878 000
(i) One unextended nuclear family households	953 799	1 147 974	1 313 159	N.A.
(ii) Others	361 622	388 483	361 023	N.A.
2. Average household (proxy family) size	3.4	3.3	3.1	3.0
3. Proportion of one unextended nuclear family households	61.6%	63.6%	66.2%	N.A.
4. Domestic households with children aged under 15				
(a) 0	911 934	1 138 961	1 336 154	1 599 800
(b) 1	314 539	372 603	405 294	444 600
(c) 2	259 698	270 681	256 040	236 400
(d) 3	} 96 044	60 666	47 245	28 900
(e) 4 or more		12 642	8 679	4 100

Broad family profile	1991	1996	2001	2006
Average number of children aged under 15 (per household with such children)	1.7	1.6	1.5	1.4
5. Total number of elderly people (aged 65 or above)	482 040	629 555	747 052	N.A.
(a) In domestic households	452 250	594 731	679 097	800 500
(i) Living with family members/others	391 249	522 617	594 330	684 900
(ii) Living alone	61 001	72 114	84 767	115 600
(b) In non-domestic households	29 790	34 824	67 955	N.A.
6. Single-parents				
(a) Single-parents with children aged under 18	34 538	42 309	58 460	78 500
(b) Children aged under 18 with single-parents	52 826	62 050	81 644	103 500
7. Long hours of work				
(a) Couples with children aged under 18 and both being employed				
(i) Both parents with long hours of work ( $\geq 60$ hrs / week)	11 300 (1993)	13 400	18 000	17 100
(ii) Either parent with long hours of work ( $\geq 60$ hrs / week)	31 800 (1993)	47 700	62 800	71 300
(b) Single parents with long hours of work ( $\geq 60$ hrs / week)	3 200 (1993)	4 200	5 900	9 200

Broad family profile	1991	1996	2001	2006
8. Domestic Violence				
(a)(i) Number of Domestic Violence cases	N.A.	1 251	1 213	2 628 (2005)
(ii) Domestic Violence Cases/100 000 households	N.A.	67.4	59.1	115.0 (2005)
(b) Maltreatment of spouses	N.A.	N.A.	2 433	3 598 (2005)
(c) Maltreatment of children	N.A.	311	535	763 (2005)

Note : (1) The figures for 1991, 1996 and 2001 are from the Population Census or By-Census in the corresponding years except for those on domestic violence and long hours of work. The latter refers to annual figures from the General Household Survey.

(2) The figures for 2006 are from the General Household Survey in the second quarter of the year except for those on domestic violence.

(3) The figures on domestic violence cases refer to those reported to the Hong Kong Police Force.

(4) The figures on maltreatment of spouses and children refer to cases newly reported to the Central Information System on Battered Spouse Cases and the Child Protection Registry of the Social Welfare Department respectively.

(5) The total number of households with single parents shown in item 1(b) is not the same as the number of single parents shown in item 6(a) because (i) a household may have more than one single parent; and (ii) there is a technical difference in that the figure in item 1(b) is estimated on a household basis whereas the figure in item 6(a) is estimated on a person basis.

(6) The rate of domestic violence cases per 100 000 households in 2005 is estimated with the number of cases and the average number of households in the second and third quarter of the year, as obtained from the General Household Survey.

Source : Census & Statistics Department  
Hong Kong Police Force  
Social Welfare Department

**Annex 2 : Family Violence Reported Crime Cases (1996 – 2004)**

	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004
Family Violence Crime Cases <sup>a</sup>	1,253	1,149	1,072	1,665	2,289
Family Violence Cases per 100,000 households <sup>a</sup>	68.1	57.4	50.5	76.7	102.6

**Newly Reported Spouse Battering and Child Abuse Cases (1996 – 2005)**

	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2005
Spouse Battering <sup>b</sup>	na	1,009	2,321	3,034	3,371	3,598
Child Abuse <sup>b</sup>	311	409	500	520	622	763

<sup>a</sup> Hong Kong Police Force, email 05/2005 refers

<sup>b</sup> Social Welfare Department (2006a) , (2006b)

Source: The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, Social Development Topical Information – An Overview of Hong Kong Family: the Changing Family 2006 (in Chinese)