

Written submission by Women's Commission on Sustainable Population Policy

General comments

- A sustainable population policy covers a wide array of issues, all of which are interwoven and have a direct bearing on every citizen. This submission will focus on the following issues –
 - (a) declining fertility rate;
 - (b) shrinking labour force;
 - (c) ageing population;
 - (d) population quality; and
 - (e) quality of life.

The Women's Commission (WoC) is of the view that gender equality is the keystone of a sustainable population policy. Ensuring individual rights of both genders and empowerment of women are vital to the formulation of a truly sustainable population policy.

(a) Declining Fertility Rate

- The fertility rate of Hong Kong has been declining since the last decade. There is no sweeping explanation for the declining fertility rate and it may be attributable to a number of reasons. Apart from the pressure at work, factors like pollution, education, uncertain economic prospects, the cost of bringing up a child and employing domestic workers, availability of childcare services as well as the traditional gender roles in family, in particular the responsibility for nurturing children, may also affect the decision of parenthood. Delayed marriage has become a noticeable trend as evidenced by the fact that the marrying age for females at first marriage has increased from 24 in 1980 to 28 in 2005 and that for males has increased from 27 to 31 during the same period. This also shortens the fertility span and hence bears on the fertility rate. The conscious decisions of increasingly more young people to stay unmarried may also have an impact on the overall marriage and fertility rates.

- Some comment that the downward trend of the fertility rate is a result of the gradual rise in women's education level and career opportunities, which in turn has stifled their desires and plans for motherhood. While women nowadays enjoy better career opportunities than their older generations, we are aware that the intense work demands might negatively influence women's choice of motherhood, particularly in times when the traditional gender roles at home prevail and women are largely expected to be the carer of the family. The WoC **considers** that achieving gender equality at home is the first step to ease women's burden and enable them to make the reproductive decision with their spouse in an egalitarian position. On the other hand, we are glad to see that it is now more common for men to share housekeeping duties and participate in family. We hope this positive development will sustain and gender equality can be achieved within family.
- Concerning delayed marriage of women and men contributing to the declining fertility rate, as long as our society does not generally approve of child born out of wedlock, it is not surprising that career-conscious couples would enter late into the phase of parenthood. The prevailing value of society is such that young people are encouraged to put their efforts in career advancement and hence delay their decisions in other aspects of life. The WoC **considers** that the society should shift the emphasis of life from career-centred to quality-centered, and be supportive to different modes of life. Instead of solely focusing on achievements at work, people should strive to broaden their life horizons and promote diversity in society.
- As overseas experiences show that the female labour participation rate may not necessarily be in reverse proportion to fertility rate, the WoC **suggests** that an in-depth study on this subject should be conducted to unravel the reasons behind so that responsive measures could be devised to create a favourable environment that promotes parenthood or is conducive to parenthood. It is also worthwhile to include the issues on parenting stress and the changing societal ideologies (particularly those transmitted by the mass media) in the research as they may also be influential factors.
- On the prediction of fertility rate and the overall population, many question its reliability because the statistics is dependent on the data

collected locally. The figures include all babies born in Hong Kong regardless of whether their parents are permanent residents but exclude Hong Kong's residents' children born in the Mainland. The WoC **suggests** conducting more detailed analysis and calculations to monitor the composition of our population, and devising innovative means to assess the situation more accurately. These would better equip the Government to monitor and react to the changes.

- The WoC **encourages** the Government to create a favourable environment that facilitates parenthood, including the provision of childcare services, tailored housing policy for families with children, and other fiscal incentives for encouraging childbearing. Employers in the public and private sectors should also be encouraged to devise more supportive measures such as extended maternity leave, introducing paternity leave, allowing extended no-pay leave for new parents and adopting more flexible mode of work for employees to cope with family needs such as part-time and home-based work. Though there is no guarantee that such measures will yield significant impact on the choices of parenthood, they may help remove some of the hindering factors for considering parenthood by some couples. Of course, whether to raise a child is the parents' personal choice that we should respect.

(b) Shrinking Labour Force

- It is noted that there were approximately 1.6 million female workers in Hong Kong in 2005, accounting for 45% of the total working population but representing only 52% of the total female population. Excluding foreign domestic helpers, the female labour force participation rate would be adjusted further downward to 48.6% only, whereas for males, the figure stood at 71%. This figure pales next to the female labour force participation rates in other developed economies like Sweden (76%), Canada (61%), the United States (60%), Australia (56%) and the United Kingdom (55%).
- Both males and females nowadays enjoy equal access to education in Hong Kong, and the percentage of female undergraduates is slightly higher than that of their male counterparts. To improve both the quality and quantity of our labour force, we must bear in mind that women,

constituting half of our population, are valuable human resources of our community. It is necessary to ensure that women can fully realise their potentials and join the labour force, while eliminating barriers and putting them on an equal footing with men to enhance the overall productivity of Hong Kong and maintain our economic vitality and competitiveness.

- The community should give serious thoughts on changing the traditional perceptions on genders. Similar to gender stereotypes of women as carers at home, there are still gender biases against women in employment. For example, there are prejudices that married women will put their hearts and souls into taking care of their children and family at the expense of their dedication to work and they are sometimes not given due recognition and opportunities for career development and promotion. The WoC **considers** that appropriate measures or arrangements should be put in place to prevent women from family status discrimination, and facilitate those who opt to leave the employment market temporarily to take care of their families and to rejoin the workforce later, and enjoy equal opportunities in career development.
- The long working hours and the fast living pace in Hong Kong have made it difficult for both genders to achieve a balance between work and family commitments, and discouraged some women from pursuing their career when there are conflicts between the two. The promotion of family-friendly policies and practices (FEPPs) can be one of the effective measures to facilitate family developments and reinforcing the functions of family. Besides, FEPPs may also provide more flexibility to women and encourage them to enter, stay in or re-enter the workforce if they so choose, hence facilitating the continuous supply to the labour market with people of good potentials and experience.
- To this end, the WoC has collaborated with the Equal Opportunities Commission to conduct a fact-finding study on the development of FEPPs in Hong Kong. Our findings have positively demonstrated the benefits of FEPPs to both the employers and the employees. The research also showed that the 5-day week would be an important part of work-life balance. The WoC **recommends** the promotion of extending 5-day week to private sector. While the WoC will continue its efforts in promoting FEPPs further, it is considered necessary for the Government to assume a

leading role in encouraging the private sectors to implement such policies and practices.

- In view of the longer life expectancy, relaxing the retirement policy and promoting the contribution of the aged to the community may also unleash their potential. The Government should also consider measures to address the concern of age discrimination and legislating against such acts may be one of the directions that the Government may wish to explore further in the long run. Besides, the hidden talents of minority groups in Hong Kong should be further explored by facilitating them to take part in the work force so that they would not need to rely on social security assistance.

(c) Ageing Population

- Ageing population may have greater implications on women as their average life expectancy would reach 84.4 years, as opposed to 78.8 years for men. It is projected that by 2033 females will have far outnumbered males. The increase in the number of aged females may require serious attention in respect of our social and welfare system, in particular when a number of these aged females are full-time homemakers without remuneration nor retirement protection. The WoC **suggests** that the Government should consider the needs and devise proper measures to protect this portion of the population with a view to allowing them to enjoy retirement protection with dignity. In line with the notions of harmonious family, it is important that relevant policies should be formulated on the basis that it is also a family function to care for the aged.
- The WoC also **proposes** that the Government should study the needs of elderly people, train up health care professionals in gerontology and improve the overall effective health care system through a sustainable health care system.
- Senior citizens are valuable assets to society with their rich experience in life. They are now able to maintain good health with advanced medical services and continue to make contributions to society in different roles. Some suggest that work life should be extended, making it possible for those who are interested in and capable of working to stay in work.

Some consider that senior citizens might have other choices such as engaging in consultancy, counseling, volunteer work, or even return to school to pursue life-long learning. All these have posed a question on how the Hong Kong society as a whole could optimise this valuable resource and meet the physical and psychological needs of the elderly. The WoC **considers** it important to create favourable social space for the elderly and suggests that the Government should continue its efforts in promoting active, positive and healthy ageing.

- There is no concrete evidence showing that the competitiveness of developed countries suffers due to ageing phenomenon. The projected 2033 overall dependency ratio of Hong Kong indeed will not be higher than that of the early 1970s. In fact, there is increasing appreciation of the vast economic potential and business opportunities for the “silver hair segment”. The WoC **suggests** that the Government should closely monitor the demographic changes, and react swiftly to safeguard and improve the quality of life of both the youngster and the elderly. It will also be crucial for the Government to consider and devise longer-term financial plans to prepare for the resources required for supporting the aged and retired population.

(d) Population Quality

- Discussions on population quality usually focus on the enhancement of the employability and competitiveness of our labour force for the benefit of local economic development. It is however considered more important to upgrade the overall quality of our population.
- One of the examples to upgrade population quality is the WoC’s initiative named “Capacity Building Mileage Programme” (CBMP). The CBMP is developed by the WoC in partnership with the Open University of Hong Kong and Commercial Radio, and aimed at empowering women through an innovative, flexible and convenient mode of learning, and developing their learning interest, personal judgment and self-confidence; thus widening their perspectives and realising their potentials. Since the launch of the CBMP in March 2004, we have seen a good number of participants who used to be lack of confidence and shy away from getting involved in social affairs, have transformed into confident and independent

individuals with a positive attitude towards life. They have also exerted positive influence on their families and their children. Hence, improving the overall quality of the female population will add value to the overall quality of the entire population, and sustained efforts should be made in this direction.

- Whole-person development of the new generation is also of utmost importance. In particular, the WoC **considers** it important to foster positive and proper life values in them and promote a caring family environment. Over the past two years, the WoC has dedicated a lot of efforts in the promotion of nurturing caring families, with an emphasis on quality parenting. We have taken forward two key initiatives to empower both women and men to become quality parents and to promote nurturing of caring families in the community. One is a research on the core life values for parenting education to be instilled in the younger generation. We will also initiate a pilot project on quality parenting in collaboration with the Kwun Tong District Council. The Chief Executive has stressed in his Policy Address the importance of quality parenting in nurturing the next generation and it is noted that more resources would be allocated for this work.
- The WoC notes that there has been increasing integration between Hong Kong and the Mainland on all fronts. In particular, there has been increasing number of school-aged children with Hong Kong residency now residing in the Mainland and they may return to Hong Kong in due course. They will be our future supply of talents and it would be important for the Government to devise policies and measures to facilitate the integration of this portion of the population into the Hong Kong community when they return, e.g. in respect of education and training programmes so as to facilitate continuity.

(e) Quality of Life

- Improving the quality of life of our population is key to sustainable development. There is growing concern in the community about work-life-family balance. While workers in Hong Kong may regard the immense pressure at work as a part of life, there is increasing awareness that long-term work stress and work/life imbalance will affect physical and

mental health of the workforce in various aspects, undermine the functioning of families, and give rise to social problems entailing long-term social costs. The WoC has made sustained efforts on this front in promoting FEPPs, and encouraged employers to provide more flexible and accommodating working environment or arrangements as a means to help employees manage family responsibilities and make the right choice to cope with the changing needs and circumstances in different stages of life. This will go a long way towards reducing the employee's pressure of balancing work/family roles.

- As mentioned above, the WoC and the Equal Opportunities Commission earlier engaged a university to conduct a study to get a better understanding on, among other things, the needs, awareness, prevalence and benefits of FEPPs in Hong Kong. Respondents from companies adopting FEPPs reported less perceived work stress, higher job satisfaction, less physical/psychological symptoms, less work/family imbalance, more work/life balance and more family satisfaction. These findings provide us important indicators on how best to maintain a healthy and vibrant population and to enhance their quality of life. The WoC **considers** that such issues require more in-depth study when formulating a sustainable population policy for Hong Kong.
- Rapid development in information technology and the emerging global knowledge-based society and economy will inevitably bring changes to lifestyles and modes of work. It is envisaged that the positions of self-employed and home-based workers will grow.
- To tie in with all these anticipated changing trends, the WoC **recommends** that both the public and private sectors should provide a more diversified and flexible working environment and cultivate a supportive culture that promotes work-life balance and accommodates employees with different needs, as well as to further upgrade the quality of our population in meeting the challenges ahead.

Women's Commission
November 2006