



21 February 2014

Mrs Carrie LAM, GBS, JP  
Chief Secretary for Administration  
Chairman, Steering Committee on Population Policy  
26/F, Central Government Offices,  
2 Tim Mei Avenue, Tamar,  
Hong Kong

Dear Mrs LAM,

**Public Engagement Exercise on Population Policy**

A population policy is fundamental to a healthy and sustainable development of a society. As in many other countries, the population in Hong Kong is ageing fast and the challenges brought by it will surface soon. The Women's Commission is therefore appreciative of the timely move of the Steering Committee on Population Policy to initiate a focused public discussion on how we should meet the challenges ahead.

Since a population policy will impact on all aspects of life, the issues involved should be vigorously deliberated by every member of the community with a view to coming up with a comprehensive population policy. Being the central mechanism tasked to take an overview of women affairs, the Women's Commission has held a meeting to discuss the relevant issues, in particular, those issues of women's concern identified in the consultation document. Our views are presented in the attached submission and I hope that the Steering Committee would find them useful in the course of formulating the population policy of Hong Kong.

Yours sincerely,

(Stella LAU)  
Chairperson, Women's Commission

Encl.

## **Public Engagement Exercise on Population Policy**

### **Written Submission by Women's Commission**

Women constitute half of the population in Hong Kong. Women's interests are therefore inseparable from a comprehensive population policy which targets to address the economic and social needs of Hong Kong people. The Women's Commission (WoC) is pleased to note that the Steering Committee on Population Policy (Steering Committee) has engaged the public in a discussion on how to address women's concerns in the areas of employment and raising families in the consultation document. To present our perspectives of these issues and facilitate further public deliberation, we have set out our views in the ensuing paragraphs.

#### Facilitating women homemakers to work

2. Women should enjoy the right to choose their own way of life as men do. Their choice of life plans should be respected, no matter they choose to join the workforce or perform familial duties or both. Appropriate support should be provided for women so that they could overcome the obstacles in pursuit of their choices.

3. Facilitating women employment is not only of instrumental value of supplementing the existing workforce and generating greater economic yield for a society, but also vital to the promotion of women's well-being. Paid employment empowers women by developing their potentials, improving their confidence and widening their perspectives which in turn adds impetus to the quality of their lives. It also enables women to gain financial independence, reduce their reliance on their families and enhance their social status.

4. Respecting women's right to work, we agree with the Steering Committee that the Government and the civil society should remove the barriers that hinder women from work. Appropriate support should also be rendered to women who wish to take up employment. We have heard a lot of comments about the obstacles faced by women in Hong Kong. It is often said that many women homemakers who wish to work are tied up by household duties, in particular child care responsibilities, and more support from the Government and the business sector is needed so that they can join the workforce.

5. If financial condition permits, women would be able to hire domestic helpers to take care of their children as they go to work. However, those who are less well-off may not have many choices other than sending their children to child care centres. An adequate provision of child care services will therefore be able to facilitate women employment. Currently, the places of child care centres (including day nurseries) are insufficient and the charge may not be affordable to some. Sometimes, families with genuine child care need may not have access to such services as they fail the means test which is considered by some to be too stringent. Increasing child care places and providing more fee waivers to those in need are possible solutions to the problem. As an alternative solution, introduction of a child care allowance would be explored.

6. When considering whether to use child care services, service quality is an issue of concern to women in addition to the availability and affordability. It is important to strengthen the element of education in child care services, i.e. the provision of "educare", which would enable children to learn during their stay at child care centres. We should also have regard to the need to enhance support to parents whose children have learning and behavioural problems and are in need of parenting support. Stationing social workers at child care centres could be explored. A dedicated resource centre may also be set up to provide comprehensive information and development programmes on parenting.

7. Government aside, employers in the business sector also play a crucial role in helping women to balance family and work by suitably adjusting job arrangements. The business sector should be encouraged to adopt family-friendly employment practices and policies such as longer paid maternity leave, job sharing, compassionate leave for taking care of sick family members, etc. We understand that some women consider that children should best be raised in the family and it will not be conducive to family solidarity and development of children if their children are to be left to child care centres frequently. Arrangements like flexible working hours could help women take care of their familial responsibilities and work at the same time. However, most of the positions in the current job market that offer flexible working hours are of low-skilled nature. If we are to tap the resources of those well-educated homemakers, the business sector would have to consider creating more positions requiring a higher skill level.

8. We firmly believe that women's right to work should not be conditional upon their difficult decision to give up the time spent on their families. It is just not right to ask working women to abandon their families, not to mention that it may probably result in a heavy social cost that we will regret. While some government intervention, such as tax rebate, may help resolve the problem, the business sector could be encouraged to adopt family-friendly employment policies and practices proactively.

#### Helping young people to form and raise families

9. Despite our emphasis of the importance of work to women in the preceding paragraphs, we understand that some women do prefer devoting their time to families and their wishes should be respected. Recognising the important contribution women make to the families and society as well as respecting their life choices, we agree with the Steering Committee that in addition to facilitating women employment, the Government and the civil society should also take care of the well-being of women who choose to be women homemakers by fostering a supportive environment for them to form and raise families.

10. It is understandable that when deciding whether to form a family or bear a child, young couples are often concerned about the financial impact of childbearing, their abilities to earn a living and career prospect. To facilitate them to form and raise families, it would be helpful if the problem of job insecurity is addressed and the diversity of jobs is increased by developing new industries. It would not be realistic to see the effects of these suggestions overnight though. The Government may therefore consider introducing higher tax allowance for dependent children in the interim which could be effective in raising the birth rate in the immediate future.

11. The consultation document has mentioned some overseas experiences in encouraging childbearing which include providing cash allowance to help parents meet the direct costs of pregnancy, e.g. assisted reproductive technology. In Hong Kong, it does not seem to be cost-effective to use public money to support couples to bear children through reproductive technology. We should also guard against any unintended effect of "incentivising" women to delay their childbearing.

12. To facilitate women to form and raise families, we could consider further enhancing some existing supportive measures. Foreign domestic helpers have become necessary helpers to many families. In addition to countries from where foreign domestic helpers are being imported like the Philippines and Indonesia, the Government may consider importing such helpers from other places.

#### WoC's work

13. WoC attaches great importance to women issues, and one of them is women employment. WoC has already set women employment as the theme of its work in 2014-15 and is taking forward some relevant initiatives. Among others, we will provide subsidies for women's groups and non-governmental organisations to organise programmes that facilitate women employment through the Funding Scheme for Women's Development. In collaboration with the Labour and Welfare Bureau and the Census and Statistics Department, we are conducting a survey to identify the reasons why Hong Kong women leave the labour market and the factors that would attract them to join or re-join the workforce. The findings would shed light on the way forward for facilitating and promoting women employment. We will continue to work with the Government to promote the well-being and interests of women in Hong Kong.

**Women's Commission**  
**February 2014**