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Statement submitted by Hong Kong Federation of Women’s Centres, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres, founded in 1981, is a non-partisan and non-religious women's organization in Hong Kong. We focus on the situation of women, especially grassroots unpaid caregivers and single mothers, and aim at promoting gender equality in Hong Kong through education and advocacy. Through our women's centres, we develop volunteer networks, provide appropriate services for women, and develop their potential. We acquired Special Consultative Status from the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 2002.

3Rs to Improve the Situation of Carers

No one is born to be a carer. Being a carer should be a choice instead of an obligation. Regardless of those carers involving in unpaid or paid care work or those who are differently abled but still bear care-giving responsibilities, their care work and the value of the care work are largely unrecognized by our society and governments. This results in their low social status, and their economic rights as citizens, labour rights, right to social protection, retirement protection, etc. being neglected. In recent years, there have been numerous tragedies where carers have murdered the cared as a relief to end their sufferings, followed by suicide of the carers. Carers are at their breaking point. We urge the international community and the member states of the United Nations to focus on carers, address their difficulties and improve their situation through Recognizing, Reducing and Re-distributing care work.

Recognize care work

First, it is necessary to recognize the carer's social and economic contribution and make them visible. Unpaid care work is, most of the time, not counted in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and hence impossible to reflect their economic contributions in a convenient and widely-understood way. The contribution of unpaid care work is far more than our imagination. Care for Carers, an alliance concerning unpaid carers in Hong Kong conducted a survey in 2018 and found that unpaid carers worked for an average of 13 hours a day. Comparing their work with similar paid jobs, their monthly salary, if they were paid, could reach USD20,000. To recognize care work as work with value and its contribution to the advancement of the society will involve recognizing carers as paid labour with labour rights set out by the International Labour Organization. This will also involve introducing a carer-orientated policy and allocating adequate social protection for carers while they are involving in care work and after completion of care duties. Adequate monetary allowance, services to support carers and pension are all important initiatives to support carers and recognize their work as decent work with value and contributions to the advancement of the society. This will also involve recognizing the economic value generated by carers through incorporating their work value in the GDP.

Reduce care work borne by carers

Second, it is to reduce the care responsibility of carers. Care work should not be the sole responsibility of an individual. It is the responsibility of all family members and the society. Tradition norms still see women as carers. This makes women the primary caregivers to take care of family members who are unable to take care of themselves. The situation is even worse when governments are unwilling to shoulder the responsibilities of healthcare, institutionalized or community-based care for

groups in need such as elderly, chronically ill, disabled or development of children with special education needs, etc. These service gaps are automatically shouldered by carers who are primarily women. But care work should not only be one person's matter, it should also be the matter of everyone. The society and government should have an active role to provide supportive services to the women and carers as well as come up with alternative care options to reduce the care work of carers, hence releasing the pressure they face.

Re-distribute care work

Third, it is to re-distribute the tangible and intangible resources to support carers in order to maintain a decent livelihood. In 1978, American scholar Diana Pearce coined the phrase *the feminization of poverty*, which has vividly analysed and described the situation of povertization of women in which women are more vulnerable to become the poverty population than men. If there are not appropriate social protection or security policy, the situation would be more serious. The phenomena of feminization of poverty is also applicable to carers, especially to full-time unpaid carers. In Hong Kong, many full-time carers have to spend their savings to pay the bills of caregiving such as travel expenses in escorting the cared for medical appointments. They do not receive an income but in fact are using up their savings. To avoid carers falling into poverty, gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment have to be incorporated into all policy initiatives and public finances. The gender mainstreaming and assessment processes have to be transparent so that all stakeholders, such as women's groups, are able to contribute to the processes by giving constructive comments and suggestions.

A Fair Chance for Single Mothers

Poverty among single-headed households is common. In 2018, the poverty rate of divorced households was 35 per cent in Hong Kong. Failure to receive maintenance payment is one of the reasons that lead to poverty and mental distress of both adults and children in single-headed households as the process of recovering it can be humiliating and confrontational. Establishing an intermediary body to collect the outstanding maintenance payment from the payer and distribute it to the payee will reduce the difficulties faced by single mothers to receive the maintenance payment that they deserve.

Lack of childcare support is another obstacle on the personal and career development of single mothers, making them vulnerable to poverty. In 2018, more than 60 per cent of single-headed households under the official poverty line had children to take care of, obstructing them to join the labour force. Although single mothers have experienced marital problems and take time to recover, they still have many capabilities and capacities on various aspects once they have a chance to showcase. For instance, the provision of affordable childcare service will release single mothers from caring responsibility and have time to engage in paid employment or academic or vocational studies to further develop themselves.

Recommendations

To alleviate the pressure faced by carers and to prevent single mothers from falling into poverty, we recommend member states of United Nations to:

introduce carer-based policies that recognize carer's contribution to the social and economic advancement of the society;

provide adequate and appropriate services and social protection to carers so as to maintain a decent livelihood of carers. This includes but not limited to adequate healthcare, pension, supportive services for the cared;

adopt gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment in all public policy and budget formulation, and make the process transparent for all stakeholders in the society;

implement supportive measures, such as providing adequate, affordable and assessable childcare services to single mothers and establishing an intermediary body to collect outstanding maintenance payment, so that single mothers could have a chance to develop their career and personal development.
