

# **Women of Voices for Protection**

## **Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women**

### **59<sup>th</sup> Session: to complement the combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of States parties: Hong Kong, China**

In Hong Kong we have very little rights. Many times we feel afraid to speak about issues that affect us or we think that the situation is hopeless and so we keep quiet. As asylum seekers and refugees, we also have extra security risks as well. These are some of the main concerns that we, the women of Voices for Protection,<sup>1</sup> want to bring to the attention of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

#### **UNIFIED SCREENING MECHANISM (USM)**

The Hong Kong Government created a new system to screening protection claims on 3 March 2014. We have not been given full information by the government on how it works, how it is structured and how long it will take to process our claims. Also, many women do not feel comfortable sharing sensitive information with male Immigration Officers or government legal aid lawyer (Duty Lawyer Scheme or DLS). We should be asked at the beginning of the process if we prefer to have a female immigration officer or lawyer.

#### **EDUCATION**

Education is important for women and girls because it is a way for them to learn, but also to become empowered. This is the same for asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls. We would like to be able to have access to university and adult education. Many of us are mothers with children. We only receive in-kind assistance and we are not allowed to work, so we cannot pay for many things ourselves, including for our children. A big problem is kindergarten costs, such as school fees, books, snacks, uniforms, etc. We only get a partial school fee paid by ISS, but to pay the rest of the bill, we have to depend on charities. Sometimes we can get outside help, but sometimes we cannot find support or it may run out after time. For many families who will start school again in August, this is a big issue.

#### **HOUSING**

It is important that case officers in ISS take into account women's security needs in housing. If we have to leave our accommodation and look for other housing options, there is not always room in the shelters, which are often full. Sometimes, we are just told to stay with a friend. There are cases of women who, because they do not have other options, have to share a house or even a room with men. This is not a comfortable situation for them and can open up to situations of abuse. Compared to men, being homeless and sleeping on the street is more of a security risk for us. Single women are especially vulnerable in Hong Kong. There should be more consideration

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<sup>1</sup> 'Voices for Protection' is a refugee-led advocacy and community empowerment project by Justice Centre Hong Kong. The content of this document represents the views of a group of female asylum-seekers, refugees and other women seeking protection under the project.

given for people with special needs, like families with children or pregnant women. Sometimes housing is in walk-ups or even on roofs and it is hard for them.

## **FOOD**

The food is not enough and it is not very healthy. We get bags of food from ISS that are supposed to last us 10 days, but really they only last us 5 or so days. Also, sometimes the food we get at a pick-up day we cannot make a meal with. Maybe one week we will get rice and the next week meat. As mothers, we often give our kids the food as priority and go hungry ourselves. We want our children to get nutritious food, but the juice, milk, meat, etc. is not good quality. It is often about to expire or can even be rotten sometimes. The food has made us sick before. We do not believe the amount that we are given matches with the amount that we are supposed to get. With the same amount in cash, we could shop for ourselves and get many more items. The food is difficult to transport, and for women who are pregnant or with kids, they should be given taxi money to collect food, or change so that we can get food in normal stores close to where we live. If we miss our appointment to pick up the food, we cannot get the food back on another day or at the next pick-up. Some NGOs provide food but sometimes this is far from where we live.

## **UTILITIES AND OTHER ITEMS**

ISS is supposed to pay the landlord for utilities. We have a hard time managing the electricity we consume for several reasons. First, a lot of times several people or families live in the same house and use the same meter. Second, we do not get copies of our utilities bills to see how much we are using. This would be very helpful and would be more transparent. There should be flexibility in the amounts each month because in the winter months we use less electricity than in the summer months, where we need to use more electricity for things like air-conditioning. There are often problems between the ISS paying the landlord for utilities and our electricity and water is sometimes cut for several days at a time because it does not last until the end of the month. Also, there are many other things that we are supposed to get in the ISS contract, like cooking appliances or clothes that we do not get in reality, but that we need to survive in Hong Kong.

## **HEALTH**

As women, sometimes we do not feel comfortable talking to a male doctor and we do not tell him everything. Also, it can take a long time to get an appointment with the doctor, and then when we get an appointment, the doctor will see us for such a short time that the problem we have is not addressed.

## **AUTHORITIES**

Because we have no legal status in Hong Kong, we have to report to Immigration every two weeks at the same time on the same day. If we do not sign our paper at Immigration, we can be put in detention. The Immigration Officers do not have any flexibility for education or health needs. So, if a person is sick and not feeling well, they still have to go to Immigration. Also, if the time we are supposed to sign coincides with our children's schooling, we have to take our children out of school to sign. This means that they miss a half-day of school every two weeks. With the police, if we have been victim of a crime, sometimes we are afraid to report to the police, or when we do, the police do not believe us.

## **CONCLUSION**

We want people in Hong Kong to accept us as human beings just like anyone else. Sometimes we are speechless because we feel that whatever we say, no one wants to listen. We want to thank the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for your time and attention and we hope these issues can be improved.