

# ORAL STATEMENT

## LegCo Panel on Constitutional Affairs



Meeting on 21 July 2014: Agenda Item III. Third Report of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Good afternoon.

My name is Victoria Wisniewski Otero and I am the Advocacy Officer at Justice Centre Hong Kong - an NGO that serves to protect the rights of Hong Kong's most vulnerable forced migrants, including refugees, other people seeking protection and survivors of modern day slavery.

We have sent a written submission to this panel meeting regarding Hong Kong's efforts to combat human trafficking and forced labour.

However, I would like to turn my attention now to the challenges that refugee women and girls face while they are seeking protection in Hong Kong.

I urge every LegCo member and Government official here to read a heart-felt submission that has been made especially for this session by a handful of these women.

Their letter describes how they struggle to survive in Hong Kong while they wait for a decision on their claim. It includes both the perspectives of single women as well as mothers with children.

For example, they note that the much-criticized in-kind food package means that mothers are often the first in the family to go hungry to ensure their children are fed with the meagre food they are given, equivalent to 40 HKD a day per single adult, even with recent enhancements.

They discuss how the extremely-low housing allowance puts these women in precarious accommodation and can force them into uncomfortable situations that can even pose security risks, such as being forced to share a room with male strangers. Many of these women are themselves survivors of sexual and gender-based violence experienced in their home countries.

These are just some examples of the challenges they describe. Of great concern to Justice Centre are the multiple forms of discrimination these women face in Hong Kong and the lack of human rights and gender-mainstreaming into policies designed to attend to their socio-economic needs.

In fact, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recently issued recommendations to the government last month precisely on this point.

For this reason, we urgently request that the Government re-evaluate the humanitarian assistance package before the next tender. There are many inefficiencies in the current program that waste resources and are undignified for refugees. It's a lose-lose situation.

Many civil society groups have proposed alternative solutions that have been proven to work in other country contexts, such as moving to a cash transfer or at least a voucher system for food, for example.

Obviously, what would make an even bigger difference would be to allow refugees to be self-reliant in the first place.

To conclude, in their letter, the women note "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 urge the government not to neglect the rights of refugee women and girls.