

ORAL INTERVENTION

Legislative Council

Subcommittee on Poverty, Meeting on 25 April 2014: Measures to support ethnic minorities in relation to employment and integration into the community

My name is Victoria Wisniewski Otero and I am the Advocacy Officer at Justice Centre Hong Kong, formerly the Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre.

Today, I would like to emphasize that refugees and other people seeking protection are some of the most marginalized of ethnic minority communities in this city. They arrive in Hong Kong having been forced to flee from unspeakable human rights abuses in their countries of origin.

With the Unified Screening Mechanism now in place, the Government is going to have to get serious about long-term solutions for successful claimants in this new system. Poverty and legal limbo are not long-term solutions.

While protection claimants are awaiting a decision on their claim - a process that can take many years - they are forced to rely on an inadequate humanitarian assistance. Even recent "enhancements" to the package still put recipients below the poverty line.

The Hong Kong government often emphasizes that employment is the best route out of poverty.

Yet, unlike other vulnerable groups, protection claimants are legally barred from working. While discretionary, temporary permission to work can be given, it has hardly ever been granted in practice by the Director of Immigration. We are only aware of a handful of cases.

This policy is inhumane. The government is forcing people into avoidable deprivation and an impossible situation. Either the humanitarian assistance provided to protection claimants has to be livable, or protection claimants must be able to earn their own living.

The vast majority are of working age. If given a choice, they would prefer to be self-reliant rather than forced into the dependence for which they are often unfairly portrayed. Many were professionals in their home countries and have skills to offer.

As a bare minimum, the government should allow mandated refugees and substantiated torture claimants to work. These are people with a proven claim.

We remind the Government that we are talking about a small subset of an already very small number of people. It is clear that there is a labor demand, given that for many sectors in Hong Kong, there is a very real manpower shortage. Much discussion has been dedicated to how to resolve this problem.

What the Government must realize is that work is much more than about livelihoods. It is about dignity, a sense of purpose in life, a way to interact in the community and a way to contribute to society.

The status quo is simply unsustainable. Going forward, the Subcommittee on Poverty must make sure to include protection claimants' needs in its discussions.