1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some areas of concerns facing the girl child in Hong Kong. Though my topic given is violence against girls, I’ll try to also cover some areas beyond violence, which may be similarly harmful to the girl child in Hong Kong.

Being an affluent society, in many aspects Hong Kong measures up to the developed world. Because of this impression, people tend to underestimate problems that the community encounters, particularly those appearing in its very subtle forms. Because of this impression, attention and resources were often inadequately devoted to the improvement of such problems that the community genuinely encounters, particularly those appearing in its very subtle forms.

The Initial Report on the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is an important and useful document reflecting Hong Kong’s establishment. Nevertheless there is no special in-depth discussion about the girl child who is unique and often times even more vulnerable. Furthermore, in general, it did not reflect the will to unravel inadequacies and the drive to seek improvement.
2. Child Abuse

2.1 Child Sexual Abuse

The Initial Report under Article 5 discussed about Pornography and Protection to Women against Violence and under Article 11 Discrimination and Sexual Harassment. There was no special coverage about the girl child who is more vulnerable, more at risk of sexual harassment and there is no discussion about sexual harassment at home, in school and in the community.

The Hong Kong community’s concern in the area of child sexual abuse has accelerated in the 90's. From 2% of all child abuse cases reported in 1990 (11 out of 429 cases), we witnessed a drastic increase to 30% of all reported child abuse cases in 1997 (242 out of 815). (1) Out of these child abuse cases, 60% of the children victims were girls and 40% were boys. The percentage of girl victims in child sexual abuse cases was even higher, 80% were girls and 20% were boys.

Regarding people who abuse in general, housewives in particular made up the largest group. This reflects the concern that child rearing still mainly falls on the shoulder of women. The stresses and isolation, in addition to prevailing believe in the practice of corporal punishment, often contribute to abuse. However in child sexual abuse situations, male abusers, almost 90%, dominate the scene.

Though we should not forget that boys were also being identified as victims and female identified as abusers, the high percentage of girl-victims and male abusers caused grave concern.

We applaud the change of government policy in the handling of child abuse cases, from a generic to a specialized approach and her taking an active role in amending legislation, introducing administrative measures, improving training and publicizing the problem is also recognized. Refer to Appendix II : Changes Relating to Child Sexual Abuse.
However the strong emphasis solely on criminal investigation, prosecution and stiffer penalty for sexual offences is not going to solve the problem. The strong legal flavour sometimes threatened victims and families to seek help for fear of splitting families and jailing abusers who are often family members or acquaintances.

The exaggeration of 'not to contaminate evidence' is often so strong that it blocks effective participation. Non-legal Professionals became cautious and sometimes distant themselves from the victim who is thus left to struggle alone during the most stressful process after disclosure. The statutory involvement has thus contributed to further pain and trauma and chances of children recanting have therefore further increased.

There is also an expressed concern about the apparent bureaucratic neglect of young children who are the subject of Care and Protection Orders. The emotional welfare of these children has been ignored as they continue to be treated in the same manner as those older children who have been accused of criminal activities such as engaging in the vice trade or having suspected triad links. It appears that they are regularly placed in the same room as the older children. This creates the perception by these children that they have done something wrong and that the Care and Protection Orders is regarded as punishment for their 'wrong behaviour'.

We advocate a humanistic and holistic approach:

a. to tackle the factors underlying abusive behavior,

b. to allocate adequate resources and improve the system attending to the welfare, therapy and after care of children, perpetrators and families,

c. to widen sentencing options to include effective rehabilitation programmes and community services for relevant parties, and

d. to be consistent in interpreting abuse and in sentencing (2).
Furthermore, the hands of the statutory parties are sometimes tied for lack of evidence or parental cooperation. Such cases may return to non-statutory parties. The role of family members and various professionals in identifying abuse, facilitating disclosure and ensuring safety of children must be encouraged and supported.

However at the present moment in Hong Kong there is every indication that those with the least real case experience, e.g. child care workers, teachers and the least knowledgeable about sexual abuse are the first point of contact for reports or disclosure. We are therefore not surprised to witness children not referred to relevant parties, being hastily referred to the statutory parties or back and forth to different parties. Before the new changes, we witnessed a girl being referred back and forth to nine different parties for interview and physically checked up by four different parties of the opposite gender. After the changes, we witnessed another girl being referred to six different parties and had to be checked up three times by professionals of the opposite gender. The improvement is certainly insignificant.

Everyone expects an 'expert' to handle the case. The safest and easiest way to protect oneself is to hand the child to someone else. But no expert is readily produced without undergoing thorough training and being exposed to abundant practice opportunities. The present fragmented approach must be properly addressed. Genuine and sensible inter-agency, or inter-disciplinary collaboration and sharing, should be encouraged. The Privacy Ordinance should be respected and not used simply out of ignorance or as a matter of convenience to hide information or to keep others away. To include necessary parties, GOs and NGOs, parents and perhaps children, at suitable points of time are beneficial to all parties. Multidisciplinary training and sharing may enable one to appreciate the other and to look at the problem from different angles. Legal professionals, police officers, lawyers and magistrates, need to be viewed as partners of the child protection team and they need to view others as partners in the whole exercise as well.

Extensive and early education for the public, adults and children in Sex Education is essential. The enormous number of children and youth using the Dr Sex Hotline (450, 000 hotlines made in two years) (3) reflected a genuine desire for sex related information. Half of these calls were made by the 11-20 year-olds, 18.52% by the 10 & under. Topics enquired were 34% intercourse, 19.3% masturbation, 18.7% sexual gratification, 15.2% safe sex and 12.8% commercial sexual activities or prostitution. The existing sex
education in schools needs to be reviewed as it is obviously not meeting genuine needs. We propose to publicize a counselling and reporting hotline to enable children and youth to seek help.

2.2 Child Pornography

The community is beginning to recognize different types of sexual abuse: those with or without physical contact; intra or extra-familial; with or without violence. Issues we always believe remote and non-existing in Hong Kong such as pedophiles, child prostitutions, child pornography etc. are actually so real.

Hong Kong has no laws treating child pornography as a specific offence. The government does not keep statistics on seizures of pornographic materials or prosecutions for distributing pornographic specifics to children. However informal Police Department figures reveal that this is a problem.

In the past 3-year child pornographic materials seized include:

- 500 magazines
- 405 floppy disks
- 138 photos
- 62 VCDs
- 53 video tapes
- 31 bulletin board system
one with 1,295 active users created by Hong Kong based pedophiles
- 30 postings to a news group
- 21 web sites
- 10 e-mail address
4 CD-Roms
2 Gigabytes

We need a sound data collection system to document the extent of child pornography, child sex tourism and other child-related problems. Hong Kong needs specific legislation against production, sale and distribution, import/export publication and possession of child pornography. We also need legislation to prohibit child sex tourism. Legislation including extraterritorial jurisdiction in prosecuting Hong Kong-based international sex tourists for acts committed abroad needs to be seriously considered. Furthermore we need legislation to protect children using the Internet and those used on the Internet.

The Security Bureau's November 1998 Consultation on child pornography and child sex tourism and the proposed legislation changes is timely and covers many of the above areas discussed.

2.3 Child Left Unattended

In the Initial Report under Article 11 para 109-113 discussed about child-care facilities. An important related area which needs to be addressed is Children Left Unattended.

a. Child Deaths

The Hong Kong Coroners Reports 1989 - 1997 recorded a total of 126 home alone children from the 0-9 age group and 4 from the 9-20 age group (81 boys and 49 girls) who died because of different reasons.

b. Childhood Injury

The Childhood Injury Prevention Research Group on Home Injury among Hong Kong Children focused on the records of Accident & Emergency (A
& E) Department at the Prince of Wales Hospital for a six-month period October 1996 to April 1997. 3845 Shatin children age 15 and below made 3940 visits to the A & E Department. Half of these were home injury cases. Translating this back into the underlying population, very roughly about 3 out of 1000 Shatin children suffer a serious or suspected serious home injury in a six-month period.

Childhood risk to home injury exhibits distinct sex difference and age trend in Shatin, Hong Kong. 12 out of 1000 girls and 17 out of 1000 boys suffer home injury. Such indications of sex and age effects allude commonly to an underlying complexity of parental, familial and cultural factors in child care, child rearing, child development and home life arrangement; a scientific knowledge of which is necessary for effective childhood injury prevention and education.

c. Child Unattended Prevalence Study

The Special Topics Report No. 17 (4) collected data on Leaving Children aged 12 and below unattended at home and Keeping of cats and dogs in households. It estimated that about 110 000 children aged 12 and below in about 73 900 domestic households had been left unattended at home during the 7 days before the enumeration (DBE) by some 78 200 persons aged 16 and over who were usually responsible for taking care of them. Over 50% of them aged 10-12; another 37% 6-9; and 10% 3-5. Some 52.6% of these 110 000 children were boys and the rest 47.7% were girls. Though the rate of children left unattended at home was about the same for boys and girls, this is still a valid area of concern in Hong Kong.

Reasons given for leaving children unattended were 'went to market/supermarket' (58.5%), followed by 'went to work" (27.9%). The other two popularly cited reasons were 'accompanied another child in the household to/from school' (3.7%) and 'leisure shopping' (2%).

About 12 500 persons left children under 6 unattended at home and among them, only 700 (5.5%) had tried to seek help from childcare centre for occasional childcare service. The remaining 11 800 persons (94.5%) had not done so. The most popular reason was 'no need for they thought that the duration of leaving the children unattended at home was short (31.9%).
The next two most popular reasons were 'not aware of the provision of the services" (14.5%) and 'no need because other elder siblings (aged 6-15) were at home to take care of them.

As for the 75 600 persons taking care of the 6-12, only 3100 persons (4%) had tried to seek help from non-profit making after-school care services. The rest 72 600 (95%) had not. The three most popular reasons were: no need for children were old enough to take care of themselves, no need for the duration was short' and not aware of the provision of the services (15.1%).

We recommend a package for protection to include:

a. Comprehensive and on-going education for children & care-givers,

b. Mutual Help Programmes,

c. Accessible, affordable, flexible and more options of child care, and

d. Legislation to protect children from being left unattended

3. Girl's Conceptual Development

Dr Lau Sing, Dennis Chan and Patrick Lau's research project on "Suicide: Its Relationships with Depression, Loneliness, Self-concept and Stress among School Children and Teenagers in Hong Kong" (5) illustrates a deterioration of the girls' self-concept in the secondary school years.

It was observed that though girls scored higher in general in primary school years in the area of self concept and lower in depression, suicide ideation and hostility, in their secondary school years and entering adolescence, their self-concept decline. They scored higher in depression scales, including emotionality. A lack of positive experience in girls also warrants attention.
According to the findings of Education Convergence (6) troubled girls turning to violence has increased. Teachers inadequately trained in this area found it increasingly difficult to control unruly schoolgirls. Causes of girls' problems were mainly emotional instability, family problems and love affairs. Rebellious and violent acts involved: self-inflicted injuries, smoking and gang fighting. Girls were also found more reluctant to discuss problems with parents, teachers and parents less willing to contact others for help. The adverse impact of media violence and the glorification of triads and male figures were also mentioned.

More opportunities should indeed be provided for adolescent girls to develop their potentials and strengthen their ability to express their emotions appropriately.

4. Woman Suffering From Postpartum Depression

The Initial Report under Article 4 para 21, 22 and Article 11 para 95-97, 114-115 discussed about Maternity Protection and measures adopted. Under Article 12, 1. The report discussed about Equality in Access to Health Facilities, Provision of Service by the Hospital Authority and the Department of Health. However the problem of Postpartum Depression suffered by some 4% of women after postnatal period was not mentioned.

In accordance with Dr Lee Tak Sing's assessment of Postpartum Depression in his Mental Health Report, about 4% of women suffer postpartum depression after delivery. In Hong Kong every year an average of 70,000 women gave birth to a newborn, around 3000 suffer postpartum depression (7). They were proven to be weaker in tangible support, affectionate, positive social interaction, emotional support and information support. The more serious cases may turn suicidal or infanticidal.

Physiological factors such as hormonal changes naturally were of significance. However social factors must be properly addressed including marital relationship, in-law relationship and other social support.
At the present moment specialized services and research in this area are lacking. It is recommended that

a. Hospitals and private gynecologists to include in their assessment the assessment of the prenatal and postnatal support systems,

b. Prenatal courses to be introduced more comprehensively and extensively to include husbands, significant family members and domestic helpers.

c. Maternity and Child Health Centres to consider prenatal and postnatal home visitation programmes.

d. Special attention to new immigrants, single mothers.

5. Gender Equality: Where We Stand

Regarding Gender Equality in general, Dr Fanny Cheung in her Hong Kong Gender Equality Status Study (8) succinctly emphasized the significance of objective and subjective indicators in the assessment of the status of gender equality.

Two significant Gender Equality Perception Study conducted in 1994 and 1996 reflected that general respondents observed inequality towards women: the deprivation of the right of inheritance of women in the New Territories at that time, sexual harassment in workplace, working women heavily shouldering family responsibility and household chores, the subordinate status of women conveyed by the mass media, and a quarter of the 1994 survey respondents indicated parents still valued boys more than girls. Half of the respondents of the 1996 survey, believed that gender discrimination is a popular phenomenon. In this study alone there were 83 people (4%) who had actually experienced discrimination and 75% of them were women and 25% male.

Regarding Objective Indicators, the Population Crisis Committee (1988) compared five significant indicators including Health Care, Marriage and Children, Education, Employment, Social Security. In general Hong Kong ranked top twenty and belongs to the upper middle range. In the area of Health Care, Hong Kong ranked first twenty, in Asia she came the same as Japan, in Marriage
and Children Hong Kong ranked first twenty but lower than Tai Wan and China. In Education Hong Kong ranked the middle, lower than Tai Wan, Japan and Singapore. In employment Hong Kong ranked first twenty and was the highest in Asia. In social security Hong Kong ranked middle, parallel to Japan and China, slightly higher than Singapore and Tai Wan.

The United Nations Development Program (1994) Human Development Report has indicated if one considers gender variance when working out Human Development Indicator (HDI), many countries average ranking will be lowered. In the case of Hong Kong, the average ranking being 24th, but considering gender variance then she is lowered to the 30th. As in the case of Japan, she went down from the 3rd to the 19th.

Dr Cheung also pointed out some observations from local studies on objective indicators. In the area of Education, from the 70’s to this point of time, education level for both gender has increased, in the 12-18 age group, girls exceeds boys (e.g. in 1991, 12-16 yr. boys 92%, girls 96%; 17-18 yr. boys 54%, girls 63%).

However, compared this with Employment statistics of youth, there was a significant decrease with female as compared with male youth. (Female Youth : 1976 - 48%; 1993 - 20% and male youth : 1976 - 42%; 1993 - 28%)

Regarding employment rate, there is an anticlimax after age 25 - 29 for women. There is a significant relationship with the predominant role women shouldered in the area of child rearing and home management. Very often women were left with no choice but to retire as housewives taking care of children and household chores.

Many Hong Kong fathers are working such long hours that they are almost strangers to their children. A Study indicated that an average Hong Kong father spent 6 minutes a day with their children. Daniel Petre, author of the book Father Time (9) is right in saying that "there remains in much of the corporate world an "anti-family entrenched corporal culture" where men are "sucked into believing that they have to work long hours to be successful". There is a danger that our generation is losing forever a sense of what fathering is all about.

This is indeed a violation of Article 5 Stereotyping and Prejudices a). & b). and Article 11, 1. a) The right to work as an inalienable right of human being and c) the right to free choice of profession and employment– These women are left with no choice at all.
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