

Speech by CE at forum on Women and Poverty Reduction in 21st Century in commemoration of 25th anniversary of fourth World Conference on Women and fifth anniversary of Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (with photo/video)

Following is the English translation of the video speech by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at the forum on Women and Poverty Reduction in the 21st Century in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the fourth World Conference on Women and the fifth anniversary of the Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment today (September 16):

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning. I am honoured to speak to you today, by video, in my capacity as the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the World Conference on Women in Beijing and the fifth anniversary of the Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. As the first female Chief Executive of the HKSAR, I have the added responsibility to advance the development of women in Hong Kong. And I am pleased to have this opportunity today to speak to you about our progress in this regard.

Since Hong Kong's return to the motherland 23 years ago, we have benefited from the country's rapid development. Thanks to "One Country, Two Systems", together with our other advantages and the hard work of the people of Hong Kong, we have developed into an international financial, business and logistics centre. Today, Hong Kong is an affluent city with a Gross Domestic Product reaching US\$49,000 per capita. That said, Hong Kong is an externally oriented capitalist society, and "relative poverty" still exists in our city. The HKSAR Government has a responsibility to help the poor and underprivileged, to promote social equality and enable Hong Kong to become a more inclusive society.

The concept of "relative poverty" is to define households with income level below that of the general public as poor. This is consistent with the poverty alleviation principle, that of helping all sectors of society to share the rewards of economic development. Having established a poverty line based on the concept of relative poverty, the Government has analysed the situation of our various community groups and is providing targeted assistance to them. To help support low-income families with children at

school, for example, the Government has run the Working Family Allowance Scheme since 2016 to encourage parents to stay in employment and ease intergenerational poverty.

Hong Kong's poor population is generally larger, and the poverty rate higher, among women than men. The average income of women is also lower than that of men. This can be attributed to a host of socio-demographic factors, as well as the traditional family responsibilities borne by Chinese women. That said, providing more equal opportunities, more choices and stronger family support for women are effective strategies in improving the situation.

Hong Kong has a sound education system. All children are provided with free education for 15 years, and a high percentage of them can get into university. Since 1996, the percentage of female students in universities has exceeded that of male students, giving Hong Kong a high-quality female labour force. In fact, since 1996, Hong Kong's labour force has increased by some 1.4 million – 1 million of them women. Our female labour force participation rate, however, is still only 51 per cent, relatively low compared with other cities in the region. Given such challenges as an ageing population and keen competition for talent in the region, Hong Kong must continue to create a conducive environment for women to achieve work-family balance and enable them to fully utilise their talent at different positions in society so as to maintain Hong Kong's competitiveness.

In recent years, we have implemented a range of family-friendly policies to help working mothers take care of their children. These include enhancing the services provided by child-care centres and home-based child carers, as well as improving the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project to support women with young children to enter or stay in employment. We have extended statutory maternity leave from 10 weeks to 14 weeks, with the additional maternity leave pay borne by the Government. We have also increased statutory paternity leave from three days to five days. Moreover, we have strengthened legislation against discrimination, prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination against breastfeeding mothers.

Apart from government measures, more and more private enterprises in our society have followed suit and introduced various family-friendly measures. They understand that such measures are important in attracting and retaining talent, especially women, and conducive to the long-term development of their businesses. The HKSAR Government will continue to urge companies to create an environment that helps women fully realise their potential in the workplace.

We also encourage their participation in public affairs. Women are taking up critical positions in the Government. The percentage of female civil servants has gone up from 32 per cent before Hong Kong's return to the motherland to 38 per cent today. Thirteen of our 19 Permanent Secretaries – the highest rank in the civil service – are women. The percentage of female members serving on the several hundred advisory and statutory bodies set up by the Government is now close to 30 per cent. These figures speak of the pivotal role played by women in Hong Kong's public affairs.

The contribution of women to the prevention and control of COVID-19 in Hong Kong is also inspiring. Apart from myself, who is the leader of our city's fight against the epidemic, the Government's Secretary for Food and Health and Director of Health are women. Moreover, countless female healthcare workers, frontline and supporting staff, as well as women in Hong Kong as a whole, are all battling with the virus at different positions. I believe that the same is true for many places around the world. I salute all women for their inspiring efforts in combating the epidemic.

I wish you a rewarding and enjoyable forum. And I look forward to working with you to carry forward the spirit of the World Conference on Women in Beijing held 25 years ago and the Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment convened five years ago, and contribute to the causes of advancing women's development and alleviating world poverty. Thank you.

