

PathFinders' Oral Intervention

to HKSAR's Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services at a Special Meeting, 28 May 2016

Chairman and Committee Members

1. My name is Ruth Mabiiriizi. I am a registered, Hong Kong social worker. I represent PathFinders, a Hong Kong charity that assists pregnant, migrant women, mainly current or former foreign domestic workers, and their Hong Kong-born children;
2. PathFinders' submission today is to share our concerns about the shortcomings of current child protection practice;
3. All too often, once their pregnancy is discovered or announced, foreign domestic workers are unlawfully fired. Sometimes the women overstay their visa and go into hiding;
4. The babies then born to these women are at high risk of harm due to serious shortcomings in child protection practice and specifically the absence of time-bound and long-term care planning;
5. PathFinders' cases include those where the child has been abandoned, abused and neglected by a drug misusing parent; where the child is living in a brothel and left to roam the streets alone; where the mother is in a drug-induced coma and the father is serving a drug-related prison sentence; and where a newborn baby was abandoned by his parents for over 2 years. Typically, one or both biological parents are no longer around and/or no longer capable of being an adequate parent, be that for health, financial or lifestyle reasons;
6. We have 4 recommendations:
 - 6.1 A systemic overhaul and centralisation of CASE CONFERENCE HANDLING AND WELFARE PLAN Management. All welfare plans must be followed and reasons for inaction recorded and shared with the inter-agency core group;
 - 6.2 There needs to be clear long-term planning for children in care. Once in care, a permanency plan should be drawn up within 6 months to ensure stable child care;
 - 6.3 The Social Welfare Department needs to conduct detailed case reviews when things go wrong, identify loopholes in practice and integrate lessons learnt into practice to safeguard HK children - and communicate this to the community;
 - 6.4 ISS/SWD must ensure that the welfare plans drawn up at MDCCs are followed. Unfortunately, concerns and recommendations made by other professionals, including concerned NGOs, are all too often ignored, impeded by poor communication, a refusal to convene case conferences, and a misinterpretation of data protection and privacy priorities. Bureaucratic procedures and protocols currently appear to trump the best interests of the child and that must change, and quickly.