



# PRESS RELEASE

## MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN MUST NOT BE LEFT BEHIND IN HONG KONG'S GENDER AGENDA

March 8, 2012 - On International Women's Day, three leading NGOs call for progress on advancing women's rights to be inclusive of the needs of Hong Kong's most vulnerable groups

Although International Women's Day is celebrated in Hong Kong each year, calls for greater gender equality often include pressure to close the gender pay gap, to increase the number of women on Boards of Directors and to increase opportunities for future women leaders, leaving refugee and migrant women's concerns all too often unheard.

Every year, refugee and migrant women arrive in Hong Kong looking for a safer or better life. Many come from countries with patriarchal societies where unequal treatment, oppression and violence against women are commonplace. Refugee women have often fled gender-based persecution.

The Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre (HKRAC), PathFinders, and Christian Action - three nonprofits working with these vulnerable groups of women - voice concern that prejudice and lack of awareness are proliferating negative stereotypes, while, at the same time, the difficult realities experienced by these women remain invisible in policy debates.

"On this important day, HKRAC acknowledges the courage, strength and resilience of refugee women and girls, who represent half of the world's total refugee, internally displaced or stateless population. We want to draw attention to the risks that women face in ways not experienced by men, which exacerbate their vulnerability," said Aleta Miller, Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre (HKRAC)'s Executive Director.

Unfortunately, once in Hong Kong, refugee and migrant women are often the victims of multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination due to their gender, ethnicity, race, national origin and socioeconomic status.

Something that PathFinders, an organisation helping pregnant Foreign Domestic Helpers knows only too well. "While Foreign Domestic Helpers experience a range of discrimination issues, the most worrying trend we are seeing is a rise in the number of migrant women who suffer sexual abuse, in all forms, both in and outside the employment relationship" commented Kylie Uebergang, PathFinders Executive Director and Co-Founder.



HKRAC, which provides free legal assistance to refugees in Hong Kong, found that a staggering 58% of the single refugee women they helped last year had experienced sexual and gender-based violence back in their home country. Many of these refugee women experience re-traumatisation when they must retell what has happened to them in order to successfully apply for refugee status.

Miller says, "HKRAC calls on the government to introduce a legal framework of protection for refugees in Hong Kong, with specific policies and procedures included to address the difficulties faced by refugee women when retelling their accounts of gender-based persecution."

Christian Action, an NGO that has been working with refugees since the 1980s, notes that the safety nets in place for victims of domestic violence and abuse in Hong Kong let refugee women slip through the cracks.

"Refugee women are in Hong Kong fleeing from persecution in their home country, yet some face continued violence here in Hong Kong," says **Christian Action's Executive Director Cheung-Ang Siew Mei**. "Access to shelter and counselling is paramount for their physical safety as well as their psychosocial well-being. The basic human rights and needs of refugee women, as well as those of their children, should not be denied."

In their work supporting pregnant Foreign Domestic Helpers PathFinders has seen many women who have experienced sexual violence at the hands of their employer or others. Some women are forced to engage with her employer in sexual intercourse within days of beginning their work contracts. In one instance, the woman's employment agency refused to help and told her she would lose her job if she complained again.

Uebergang further notes, "Foreign Domestic Helpers have been instrumental in allowing women in Hong Kong to maintain a work-life balance, which has helped to close the gender gap over the years. However, the importance of their role in our lives often goes unappreciated—instead they are met with low pay, exploitative working conditions and abuse. If Foreign Domestic Helpers become pregnant, they are also denied maternity rights and often unlawfully dismissed. The care these women provide makes Hong Kong a better place, and they deserve our respect and dignity like all other workers."

In an Open Letter to the Editor at SCMP, the Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre, PathFinders and Christian Action "urge the Hong Kong people to have solidarity with refugee and migrant women. These women have experienced some of the most egregious forms of gender inequality and discrimination and urgently need more assistance and support." They further call on the Government to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of all women in Hong Kong, reminding the government of the [recommendations](#) made by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2006 when it reviewed Hong Kong's performance on women's rights.



The UN expert body recommended that the Hong Kong government ensure that female foreign domestic workers are not discriminated against by their employers or subject to abuse, as well as to strengthen the avenues for redress available to them to claim their rights. It also called on the government to extend the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to Hong Kong.

**ENDS**

**Notes for the Editor**

### **About the Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre**

The Hong Kong Refugee Advice Centre is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the protection and promotion of refugee rights in Hong Kong. It is the only dedicated provider in Hong Kong of high-quality pro bono legal services to refugees applying for international protection from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since its establishment in 2007, it has assisted over 1,000 refugee men, women and children to rebuild their lives.

About refugees in Hong Kong:

- There are approximately 1,000 applications for refugee status before the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) every year in Hong Kong.
- Of the 188 refugee men and women who received free legal services from HKRAC last year, approximately 30% were refugee women.
- The main countries of origin for refugees that HKRAC helped last year were Somalia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Yemen and Eritrea.

**Interviews with HKRAC's Executive Director, Aleta Miller, can be arranged by contacting:**

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### **About PathFinders**

PathFinders is a registered charity that strives to ensure that every migrant child born in Hong Kong has a fair start in life. Born to migrant mothers who work as Foreign Domestic Helpers, these children suffer the most when their mothers are unlawfully dismissed from their jobs due to pregnancy. PathFinders serves to empower their mothers to make informed life decisions and find a dignified path towards a safe and legal future.

PathFinders has assisted over 1,400 mothers and babies since 2008, and yet there are still over 6,000 pregnant migrant women, mothers and children in Hong Kong who desperately need support. Find further details at: [www.pathfinders.org.hk](http://www.pathfinders.org.hk)



Interviews with PathFinders's Executive Director, Kylie Uebergang, can be arranged by contacting:

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### About Christian Action

Christian Action is a Hong Kong-registered charitable organization (Charity no. 161383), established in 1985. Christian Action's mission is to serve those who are poor, disadvantaged, marginalized, displaced or abandoned, aiming to give them hope, dignity and self-reliance. Christian Action's clients include the unemployed adults and youth, new arrivals from Mainland China, ethnic minorities, refugees, asylum-seekers and foreign domestic helpers, orphans and abandoned children in Qinghai. Christian Action also provides social enterprise services. Its service is based on the example of Jesus Christ who came to serve all people, regardless of their age, gender, nationality and religion.

Interviews with Christian Action's Executive Director Cheung Ang Siew Mei can be arranged by contacting:

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