

Change slow for Hong Kong women

by Patti Flather
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HONGKONG — Women's breasts leap from covers of countless soft porn magazines at hawkers' newsstands, competing with Time magazine and the Asian Wall Street Journal on the streets of this city.

In the classified telephone directory there are 22 pages of prostitution ads under the escort heading, and 13 pages of massage ads. One agency is called "Young Girl Escorts" while another promises "Asian and Western young girls."

It is not surprising that it took a steering group of the Hongkong Council of Women several years of lobbying government and private groups before they had enough money to establish a resource centre for women's development.

"It took us a long time to get recognition for a need," says Fanny Cheung at the Jan. 25 opening of Hongkong's first women's centre. Cheung chairs the women's centre committee and teaches psychology at Hongkong's Chinese University.

But some funding has come through -- from the Hongkong government, which also arranged the location, from the American Women's Association, from a German organization called Bread for the World, and from others.

Cheung says Hongkong has a high standard of living compared with other Asian cities. The women's centre was refused funds from the United Nations because it is not considered a 'developing' nation.

But Cheung adds: "Resources do not reach women as such."

"Hongkong is a densely packed, heavily industrialized and urbanized city," reads a black board display at the centre opening. "It is a place where east meets west and where cultural conflicts arise. Women face a tremendous amount of pressure: on the one hand the traditional Asian family is dying, on the other, the modern Western support system is not fully established."

Cheung says it took years for the government to even admit that some women were being physically abused. There is one shelter for battered women in crowded Hongkong, which has a population of 5.5 million.

The shelter, Harmony House, opened in 1985. It was sponsored by another steering group of the Council, and is now supported with government funding.

The women's centre began a crisis telephone counselling service in 1981, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Chinese-speaking volunteers take the calls.

The centre has a full-time worker, Tai Sau Wai, a recent university graduate interested in working with women. Tai says in the three months since she started work, she has been surprised at how many telephone calls are from battered women.

There are more than 200 women's groups



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It's not surprising it took years of lobbying to establish a resource centre for women's development.

in Hongkong but communication between them is poor. Among the most outspoken is the Chinese-language Association for the Advancement of Feminism, while other groups are more traditional and quiet.

The women's centre hopes to increase networking between groups. Located in a Kowloon public housing estate, the centre is easily accessible by subway. It has a fledgling resource library with titles in Chinese and English, including classics from Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and others.

There is a private counselling room and a childcare room -- the latter is bare because the centre lacks money to furnish it. A health clinic is also planned.

Women involved with the centre say it is necessary because Hongkong women are still disadvantaged at home and in the workplace. Many women work outside the home but they are expected to perform a dual role, doing all the housework as well.

Few workers are unionized, particularly in the crucial textiles sector where women predominate. Piecework is common.

Employers advertising jobs almost always specify sex, race, and age of the suitable employee, with the Chinese women being offered the lowest paying jobs with less opportunity for advancement. Some ads include requests that the female applicant be attractive.

In the media the role of women is rarely addressed and treated frivolously when it is. For example, the major English-language newspaper here, the South China Morning Post, printed an article on the women's centre in the children's section, alongside stories about pets and schoolchildren.

Fanny Cheung and a colleague are completing research comparing the support systems of working class women who do participate in the community with those who don't. Cheung thinks the main problems facing Hongkong women are "lack of confidence that they can do something and lack of social support for them to come out and do it."

Hong Kong women still feel inferior

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HONGKONG — Wong Kwai-wan was brought to Hongkong from China when she was four years old. It was 1947.

China was in ruins. The brutal 14-year Japanese occupation had ended but China was torn by a civil war between Communists and the Kuomintang. Starving families sold their children.

Kwai-wan's father had died a year earlier, leaving her mother to support four children alone.

Kwai-wan and her siblings begged for a living on the streets of Hongkong -- before long her younger and older sisters had died of starvation.

The shy, neatly dressed woman is the key speaker at the recent official opening of Hongkong's first women's centre. She is introduced to the small gathering as a role model for Hongkong women. Kwai-wan is modest, though, as she talks about her life and how she became active working for tenants' rights.

"My mother valued sons more than daughters," she says, speaking in the Chinese dia-

lect of Cantonese, with an interpreter present. "I never had any chance of going to school." Sons are strongly favored in China, and female infanticide still occurs.

Kwai-wan's surviving older brother made it to school. But when Kwai-wan was 11 she became an amah, or servant for a family. When she was 14 she joined a factory, where her co-workers encouraged her to study. Kwai-wan can read but not write. "I still have a sense of inferiority," she says.

Kwai-wan had known her husband for two years before marrying him when she was 17. She thought she had a good husband, and had high hopes for life. But although Kwai-wan met her husband in a community group, once married he opposed her involvements outside the home. By the time she had three children she had totally stopped these activities.

By age 25 Kwai-wan had four children, in 1968. She made three suicide attempts that year.

Three years later was the turning point for Kwai-wan, when government social workers came to her public housing estate.

Hongkong's housing estates have to be seen to be believed -- ugly skyscrapers housing thousands of people in small apartments. Most Hongkong people live on such estates.

The alternative for the more than 500,000 people here is squatter huts.

Kwai-wan complained about living conditions on her estates: 40 households had to share two simple public washrooms with squat toilets, and there were nine people living in her 200-square-foot apartment. After a general meeting of residents, Kwai-wan and other housewives emerged as representatives of the resettlement estate.

Kwai-wan began receiving family councilling, although her husband refused. He was unemployed for long periods of time and overdrank. He also objected to sending the children to school, wanting them to make money by selling dim-sum, Cantonese food commonly eaten for breakfast or lunch.

Kwai-wan says she was also physically abused by her husband. "I would grin and bear it," she says now. But instead of leaving her husband, Kwai-wan and the children tried to explain her activities to him. She says he did become more tolerant.

In 1977 the government social agency recognised Kwai-wan's potential as a community leader and hired her as an assistant social worker. The same year her husband died, and she pulled herself through another emotional and financial crisis.

Though she felt insecure as an assistant

social worker because she lacked professional experience, the families she dealt with and other social workers identified with her informal approach. She continued the job for eight years.

Kwai-wan says through her example other women in resettlement estates became active, starting their own tenants rights groups. One woman is now in elected district board member.

Currently Kwai-wan handles affairs on a volunteer basis for thousands of tenants in the Tai Hang Tung and Hamshan Estate Residents Association. Four of her five sons are working and help support her.

In 1983 Kwai-wan ran for elected office as a district board member, one of the few positions in Hongkong chosen by direct elections. Her children, now aged between 15 and 25, fully supported her.

"It's not only men's responsibility and right to participate in politics," she says. Few women in Hongkong hold high-level positions.

Kwai-wan says she feels that although she is in middle age, she is still growing as a person. She lost her election bid but plans to run again.