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NGO FUNDING CRISIS

Don't abandon women in need

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Next Saturday is International Human Rights Day, and March 8 is International Women's Day. These two occasions remind us that not all women enjoy basic human rights. Support needs to be given to those who are struggling to defend their rights to decent work and income, to be free from violence and to live without discrimination and stigmatisation.

But many women's organisations providing such support do not have enough resources. The Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women runs Hong Kong's only 24-hour crisis centre for rape victims – RainLily. The Jockey Club has funded this pilot project since it began five years ago. The club feels that it has done its part and that the government should now take over the funding. But it is still not clear if that will happen.

Instead of having to go through the process of reporting to police, a medical examination and getting legal advice by herself, a rape victim can contact RainLily to talk to a social worker, who will then accompany her every step of the way through the medical, social welfare and judicial systems. RainLily has built close working relationships with various related sectors, including hospital emergency units. It would be a great loss if it had to close for lack of funding.

Another women's organisation under threat is Action for Reach Out (Afro) – Hong Kong's first non-governmental organisation set up to defend the rights of sex workers. It began in 1993 and now, after years of field work, Afro staff have gained the trust of a significant portion of the city's most marginalised and stigmatised group of women. Three years ago, Afro obtained funding to run Hong Kong's first integrated service centre for sex workers. Its drop-in centre provides whole-person development – healthy living, medical treatment, psychological and mental wellbeing and legalrights education – for sex workers.

Like RainLily, Afro fills a service gap in the public sector but faces funding problems. Mainstream financial supporters can be generous in funding pilot projects, sometimes on the assumption that these NGOs – which have demonstrated the value of their work to society – will later receive government support. But that transition is not guaranteed.

The Hong Kong Women Workers Association – the first NGO to fight for women workers' rights – was formed in 1989. It has done much to raise public awareness about age discrimination and poverty issues. It helps low-income women build self-esteem and become self-reliant.

This NGO's core funding is from overseas donors, who are now less willing to fund local groups because they perceive Hong Kong as a developed city. Economically we are quite well off, but many of our non-mainstream social services – those that fall outside government subsidy categories – are under-resourced.

When NGO initiatives receive no sustained funding, clients that are halfway through the healing process are once again left to fend for themselves.

Every dollar donated to supporting valuable work done by these organisations benefits not only those individuals directly involved, but also the people and the social environment that we care about.

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