

# Quality of Life of Poor People Living in Remote Areas in Hong Kong

Hung Wong

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**Abstract** Based on three surveys carried out for studying living conditions of youth, women and elderly living in six remote areas (Tuen Mun, Yuen Long, Tin Shui Wai, Sheung Shui, Fan Ling and Tai Po) in the New Territories of Hong Kong, this paper reports the poverty and social exclusion of these three groups of people. The quality of life of youth, women and elderly is adversely affected by limited job opportunities, high cost of travel for employment, and poor neighbourhoods in the community. However, perceptions of reasons for their problems are different for the three groups, due to differences in bonding and bridging social capital they have, as well as the differences in perceptions on social exclusion and discrimination directed upon them.

**Keywords** Poverty · Discrimination · Exclusion · Remote area

## 1 Introduction

Considering Hong Kong is one of the modern cities in Asia, one would think that poverty does not exist in Hong Kong. In reality, notwithstanding its image of prosperity, Hong Kong's income distribution is extremely unequal, with many people still living at or below subsistence level. Using different definitions and measurements of poverty, various researchers estimate that about six hundred thousand people, that is 10–15% of the population, were living in poverty during the period 1994–1996 (MacPherson and Lo 1997; Mok and Leung 1997; Wong and Chua 1996).

According to Oxfam Hong Kong's "Briefing Paper on Employed, but Poor", there was a significantly increasing trend of poor population and poverty rate between 1996 and 2005 (Wong 2007). In 1996, a total of 950,000 persons were living below the poverty line in Hong Kong, representing a poverty rate of 15.0%. In 2005, the total poor population increased to a historic high of 1,216,000, amounting to 17.7% of the Hong Kong population.

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H. Wong (✉)  
Department of Social Work, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories,  
Hong Kong, People's Republic of China  
e-mail: hwong@cuhk.edu.hk

In 2007, the GDP-per capita (PPP) of Hong Kong was US\$ 42,000, which ranked 13th in the world, and was similar to the level of developed countries like Switzerland and Austria (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 2008). This high GDP-per capita only represents the high aggregate level of economic development; it does not represent livelihood at individual and household levels. According to the United Nations Habitat, Hong Kong has the highest Gini coefficient (0.53) among all Asian cities, with a value that is relatively high by international standards (UN-Habitat 2008). Owing to the extremely high income disparity, though the aggregate level of economic development is high in Hong Kong, some vulnerable groups are untouched by the development process, and are living in poverty.

Poverty is evident in Hong Kong but alleviation of poverty is hindered by the geographical concentration of poor households in new towns in remote areas. In the remote areas in the New Territories, many residents complain about lack of job opportunities, high transportation cost and lack of cultural and recreational facilities, which reinforce their poverty and unemployment problems and adversely affect their quality of life.

Traditional studies on poverty and unemployment have focused mainly on material deprivation. However, going by the “social exclusion approach,” besides material deprivation, the social processes and policies that cause deprivation also need to be addressed.

“Social exclusion” is a multi-dimensional concept, involving economic, social, political and cultural aspects of disadvantage and deprivation. “Social exclusion” is often described as the process by which individuals and groups are wholly or partly closed out from participation in their society, as a consequence of low income and constricted access to employment, social benefits and services, and to various aspects of cultural and community life (Berghman 1995).

Interest in the social exclusion approach has grown in Western Europe, because of rising rates of unemployment, increasing international migration and dismantling of welfare states (Gore 1995). Hong Kong is also undergoing these three structural transformations. The structural nature of the new poverty, and increasing informalization of the labour market mean that social benefits attached to employment are becoming less available. Consequently, reducing social benefits induces adverse impacts on poor people’s quality of life.

Room (1999) summarises implications of the trend of the focus shifting from poverty research to research on social exclusion as moving from financial to multi-dimensional disadvantage, from a static to a dynamic analysis, from focus on resources of the individual or household to concern of the local community, from distributional to relational dimensions of stratification and disadvantages, and from a continuum of inequality to catastrophic rupture.

The core concept of social exclusion, according to Room, is that “people, who are suffering such a degree of multi-dimensional disadvantage, of such duration, and reinforced by such material and cultural degradation of the neighbourhoods in which they live, that their relational links with the wider society are ruptured to a degree which is, to some considerable degree, irreversible.” (Room 1999: 171)

In line with this perspective of social exclusion, I would like to investigate the multi-dimensional disadvantages of the youth, women and elderly living in remote areas of Hong Kong, and examine whether their disadvantages are reinforced by the material and social degradation of the neighbourhoods.

This study also examines the social capital owned by the youth, women and elderly in remote areas of Hong Kong. The social capital theory focuses on deterioration of social networks and the lack of civic engagement as major causes of poverty in urban cities

(Wilson 1996; Putnam 2000). Social capital refers to resources gained through social ties, memberships of networks and sharing of norms. Social capital allows individuals, groups and communities to resolve collective problems more easily. In the absence of trust and networks ensuring compliance, individuals tend not to co-operate because others cannot be relied on to act in a similar way (Coleman 1988).

Saegert et al. (2001) conclude that social capital operates at three distinct levels: within community, across communities and through ties with financial and public institutions. They suggest building social capital at the three levels to combat poverty. First, “bonding social capital” should be built within communities. Strong social bonds and effective organizations within communities provide the foundation for poor people to develop their capacity to combat poverty. Second, “bridging social capital” across communities should be encouraged. Building trust and cooperation across communities can strengthen the social fabric of the whole society and create consensus for combating poverty. Finally, social assets of poor communities may be ineffective because they are undermined by mainstream economic and political institutions. Therefore, synergy among local organizations, economic actors, and the state institutions for positive development outcomes is recommended (Evans 1997; Woolcock 1998). This is also known as “linkage social capital.”

## 2 Method

This paper reports the results of the “Research on Poverty, Discrimination and Exclusion in Remote Areas of Hong Kong” funded by the Office of the Legislative Councillor Ronny Tong. The objective of this research is to investigate the extent of poverty, discrimination and social exclusion experienced by the youth, women and elderly, who reside in remote areas in Hong Kong. These remote areas include Tuen Mun, Yuen Long, Tin Shui Wai, Sheung Shui, Fan Ling and Tai Po in the New Territories district of Hong Kong. This research consists of three different surveys. First, the youth survey was conducted in late 2005 to interview young people aged from 12 to 25; the second survey was then conducted among women aged from 21 to 64 in late 2006; and the final survey covering the elderly, aged 60 or above, was completed in early 2008. All of these three surveys employed the “purposeful sampling method” to select about 800 young people, 700 women and 200 elderly persons living in the remote areas. Half of the respondents were interviewed in public areas like railway stations, parks and markets, while another half of the respondents were interviewed in service centres like youth centres, women’s centres and centres for the elderly.

A total of 893 young people, 706 women and 211 elders, were successfully interviewed face-to-face. As the results of part-time women workers showed great variations in different areas, two focus group discussions among women were also organized to explore and understand the difference. All data of these three surveys were analyzed by the SPSS software, Version 16.

As the sampling method was not random, the results cannot be generalized to the whole population residing in the remote areas. It can only serve as an exploratory study on the quality of life of residents living in remote areas in Hong Kong. Another limitation of this study is that it is a cross-sectional study which cannot generate many explanatory results.

This paper will first highlight the employment and poverty situation of the youth, women and elderly in the remote areas, and explore how their vulnerability, unemployment and poverty are related to their living in remote locations. The second part will examine the

discrimination and social exclusion faced by them, and the final part will compare social capital in the remote areas.

### 3 Employment and Poverty Situation

#### 3.1 Youth

Among the 893 youth respondents, 68% were students, 2% were school dropouts, 17.7% were working and 4.1% were not working. Among the 212 youth over the age of 15, who were not studying in school, 25.5% were unemployed. During Q4 2005, the period of the youth survey, unemployment rate of the 15–19 age group in the whole territory was 19.1%. In contrast, youth unemployment rate in the remote areas was 25.5%, which was significantly higher than that of other areas.

For youth who were employed, their pay was very low; so most of them were working poor. According to the survey, 11.9% of them had a monthly income of less than \$2,000, 26.8% were earning \$2,001–4,000, and only 9.8% were getting a monthly wage greater than \$10,000, which was the median income of the entire working population of Hong Kong.

Not only were their individual incomes low, but household incomes were also low. Per-capita household income of 18% of youth respondents was less than \$2,000 per month, while 29.4% had per-capita household incomes in the range of \$2,001–\$3,000.

Among the working youth, 80% were engaged in full-time work and 20% were part-time workers. In terms of employment status, 24% were contract workers, 25% were casual workers, and only 37% were permanent workers. It is clear that youth workers in the remote areas were heavily affected by the increasingly volatile nature of the labour market. In terms of occupation, 43% of the youth workers were services and sales workers, while 36% were elementary workers. Industrywise, 47% of the youth workers were working in wholesale, retail, and import–export trade firms, and restaurants and hotels, while 25% were working in community, social and personal services.

Among the 149 youth who had experienced unemployment in 24 months immediately preceding the interview, 43.6% had been unemployed for less than 3 months, and 21.5% had been unemployed for 3–6 months, i.e. 65.1% had been unemployed for periods of up to 6 months. A majority of the unemployed youth experienced short duration of unemployment. Only 17.4% of them had experienced unemployment for more than 12 months, during 24 months immediately preceding the interview.

Most of the youth worked in the same district where they were living. In case of youth in Tuen Mun and Sheung Shui, 53% worked in the same district where they lived. Only 19.6% of all working youth worked in Kowloon, the urban area, whereas only 5.6% worked in Hong Kong Island, where the central business district is situated. More strikingly, less than 15% of working youth in Yuen Long, Tin Shui Wai and Sheung Shui worked in Kowloon.

Income of youth who worked in the remote areas tended to be lower than of those working in other areas. Youth who worked in Hong Kong Island had median income of \$9,500, which was close to the median income of the entire working population of Hong Kong, while those who worked in Kowloon and in the New Territories, had median income of \$7,000. Nevertheless, median income of youth who worked in Tuen Mun, Tin Shui Wai and Yuen Long was only \$5,000. As a larger proportion of youth was working as part-time workers, the median income of youth in Fan Ling, Sheung Shui and Tai Po was even less;

Fan Ling (\$3,500), Sheung Shui (\$3,000) and Tai Po (\$3,000). The median income of youth in all these six remote areas was less than \$5,000, which equaled to 71.4% of the median wage level of employed persons in Kowloon, and 52.6% of that in Hong Kong Island.

Owing to high cost of commuting, most youth in the remote areas tended to seek employment in nearby areas, thus limiting their employment opportunities. It is because not many large enterprises or companies set up businesses in remote areas. Furthermore, as the wage level in the remote areas was lower than in urban areas, these young people were trapped in low-paid jobs.

Obviously, youth employment problem in remote areas of Hong Kong is different from that in inner cities of developed countries. Youth in developed countries experience long term unemployment and exclusion from labour market while youth in remote areas of Hong Kong are facing problems of low wage and an excessively volatile labour market. Low wage and low job security are the major problems faced by the poor youth. Therefore, to alleviate youth poverty, the government should not only focus on the issue of youth unemployment but also address the issue of poverty of the working. Policy intervention should aim at increasing young people's job stability and opportunities for upward mobility.

### 3.2 Women

Among 706 women respondents, 244 (34.6%) were working while 462 (65.4%) were not working. The labour force participation rate of women respondents in the remote areas was only 34.6%, less than the female labour force participation rate in the whole of Hong Kong (51.8%). It signifies that more females in the remote areas are not engaged in paid work. For those engaged in paid work, 86% were employees, 10.6% were self-employed and 1.7% were employers.

Among these working women, 70% worked within the six areas, 12.5% worked in other New Territories areas, another 12.5% worked in Kowloon, and only 4.5% worked in Hong Kong Island. It shows that women workers in the remote areas are less likely to travel to distant areas in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island for work.

Among the six remote areas, employment opportunities in Tin Shui Wai were significantly less than other areas. Only 21.9% of working women in Tin Shui Wai worked in the same district, whereas 40.6% of them had to find work in Yuen Long, a nearby town about 20–30 min travel from Tin Shui Wai. Employment opportunities in Tai Po district, for women, were much greater than in Tin Shui Wai, as 69.8% women living in Tai Po could find jobs in the same district. For the remaining four areas, more than half (52.9–59.1%) could find jobs within the same district.

For women who had worked before, 39.2% of them were elementary workers in their current or last job, 31.0% were service and sales workers, and 21.8% were clerical workers. Only 0.5% were managers and executives, and 4.4% were professionals. Women among remote areas' workers are more likely engaged in low skilled occupations as the percentage of low skilled workers is much greater than the overall percentage in Hong Kong.

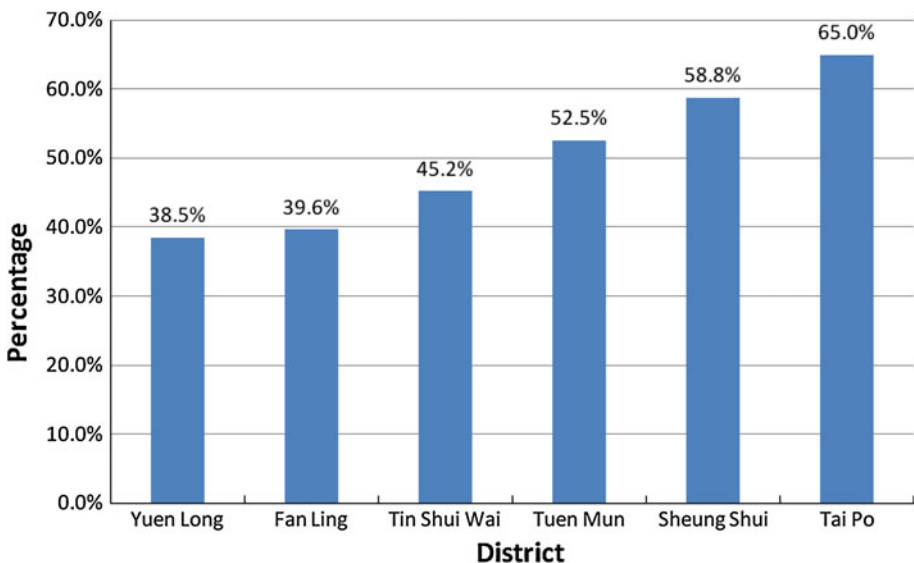
The average monthly income of these working women was \$5,778, which was about 58% of the median monthly income (\$10,000) of the working population in Hong Kong. Among the six areas, average income of women in Sheung Shui and Tin Shui Wai were relatively lower than other areas. Average monthly income of women living in Sheung Shui and Tin Shui Wai was \$4,728 and \$4,765, respectively. Average monthly income of women in Yuen Long was the highest at \$7,210. Difference in incomes of women is

determined by job nature, as well as job opportunities in the district they are living in, and opportunity to work in other areas.

Working full-time or part-time induces a significant impact on women's income. Half of the working women (50.8%) were engaged in full-time work whereas another half (49.2%) were part-timers. The average monthly income of full-time workers was \$8,254, while part-time workers earned \$3,304 a month. Part-time women workers' earnings were just about 40% of full-time women workers. Among different areas, proportions of women working part-time showed great variation (Fig. 1). Part-time workers constituted only 38.5 and 39.6% of working women in Yuen Long and Fan Ling, respectively, while this proportion was higher in Tin Shui Wai (45.2%), Tuen Mun (52.5%) and Sheung Shui (58.8%). Tai Po was found to be the district with the highest percentage of women working part-time (65.0%).

As shown in Table 1, the ratio of women engaged in part-time work was the highest in Tai Po district, with an average monthly income of \$5,378, which was higher than incomes of other part-time women workers in other areas. For part-time women workers working in Tuen Mun, Fan Ling and Yuen Long, average monthly incomes were \$3,324, \$3,139 and \$2,647, respectively. Incomes of part-time women workers in Sheung Shui and Tin Shui Wai were significantly lower than other areas, as their average monthly incomes were \$1,887 and \$2,347, respectively.

A greater proportion of women are working part-time in Tai Po than in other areas, and income earned by women part-timers in Tai Po is also higher than in other areas. During the two focus group discussions, women living in Tai Po and Sheung Shui explained the reasons. There are different types of housing, like private housing estates and modern village houses, in Tai Po, where more middle class families are living. Demand for part-time domestic helpers from these double-earners middle class families is high. The pay for part-time domestic helpers is relatively higher in Tai Po, at an hourly rate of \$50; in Yuen Long, the hourly rate is only about \$30 to \$40. Women living in Sheung Shui also reported



**Fig. 1** Percentage of women workers working part-time by district

**Table 1** Mean monthly income from employment by district

| District     | Average monthly income from employment |           |         | Income ratio<br>(part-time workers to<br>full-time workers) (%) |
|--------------|--|-----------|---------|---|
|              | Full-time                              | Part-time | Total   |   |
| Sheung Shui  | \$8,786                                | \$1,887   | \$4,728 | 21  |
| Tin Shui Wai | \$6,735                                | \$2,371   | \$4,765 | 35  |
| Tuen Mun     | \$7,447                                | \$3,324   | \$5,305 | 45  |
| Tai Po       | \$7,386                                | \$5,378   | \$6,081 | 73  |
| Fan Ling     | \$8,344                                | \$3,139   | \$6,195 | 38  |
| Yuen Long    | \$10,063                               | \$2,647   | \$7,210 | 26  |
| Total        | \$8,254                                | \$3,304   | \$5,778 | 40  |

that they could not find part-time jobs in Sheung Shui and needed to travel and seek part-time jobs in Tai Po and Shatin.

In short, working women in the remote areas are facing problems of scarce full-time job opportunities and low wage. Their labour participation rate is lower than women in other areas. Similar to the young people residing in the remote areas, high transportation costs confine women to look for jobs in local areas. Moreover, women's caregiving duties also confine them to look for part-time jobs within the district. Most of these part-time jobs are unskilled low-paid jobs that offer little protection.

### 3.3 Elderly

Among 211 elderly respondents, only 4 (1.9%) were still having paid jobs. Labour force participation rate for elderly respondents, aged 60–64, in the remote areas, was 17.6%, while the overall rate in Hong Kong was 29.3%. Labour force participation rate for elderly respondents aged 65 or above in the remote areas was 0.5%, while the overall rate in Hong Kong was 7.0%. It is clear that elderly in the remote areas were finding it more difficult to retain their jobs, compared to their counterparts in the rest of Hong Kong.

Among the four elderly respondents who were working, one was a full-time worker while three were part-time employees; two of these four elderly respondents were permanent workers while the other two were casual workers. Two of them were working in Tai Po, one in Yuen Long and the fourth was working in Mainland China. Their average monthly salary was about \$2,700. Obviously, they were part of the working poor population in Hong Kong.

Among the 207 elderly respondents who were jobless, two had been looking for jobs in the month preceding the interview; 37 (17.9%) were considering looking for jobs but did not really take any concrete action to find a job. With regard to reasons for not taking any action, 69.2% of the 37 elderly respondents believed that “no one is willing to hire us”, 35.9% thought that they had “poor health condition”, and 7.7% thought “there were no suitable jobs available in their living area.”<sup>1</sup> The elderly respondents were asked to assess the difficulty of finding a job on a Likert scale, according to which score one represented no difficulty and score 10 meant very difficult. The mean score was 7.45.

<sup>1</sup> The percentage sum of all choices is higher than 100% as interviewees could select more than one option in their answers.

Among 168 elderly respondents who did not consider looking for a job, the reason for 54.9% of them was retirement, for 25% it was poor health or other handicaps, and 5.4% needed to take care of their family.

In either current or last jobs, 59.3% of elderly respondents were elementary workers, 12.6% were service or sales workers, 9% were craft and related workers, and 4% were managers or executives. In terms of industry segment of their last job, 29.6% were in the manufacturing industry, 19.6% were in community, social and personal services, 18.1% in wholesale, retail or import–export trade, 12.1% in restaurants and hotels, and 7% were in the construction industry. Most of the elderly, before leaving the labour market, were unskilled or semi-skilled labourers in manufacturing or services industry.

Many of the elderly respondents had had early retirement because of their age and limited job opportunities in the district they lived in. 17.9% of the elderly considered looking for jobs but did not take action because of the above two reasons. As they claim that they were not actively seeking work, the Census and Statistics Department considers this type of elderly as “retired” or “economically inactive persons”, but not as part of the “unemployed” population. For the elderly, the reason for not seeking work was “no one will hire them”. They also believed that it was very difficult to get back to the labour market.

43.1% of the elderly respondents received Old Age Allowance, 33.2% received Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), the major social assistance scheme in Hong Kong, 7.6% relied on their savings, 3.3% had their own income, 0.9% relied on collecting cardboards and old newspapers or used cans for living, and 0.9% received Disability Allowance.<sup>2</sup>

The average monthly household income of the interviewees was \$4,450. 23.7% of the elderly respondents had an average household income of less than \$1,000, 10.9% were in the range of \$1,000–1,999, 24.2% in the range \$2,000–2,999, and 11.4% had average incomes in the range of \$3,000–3,999. In other words, 70.1% of elderly respondents had an average household income of less than \$4,000. It signifies that most of the elderly are living in low-income families.

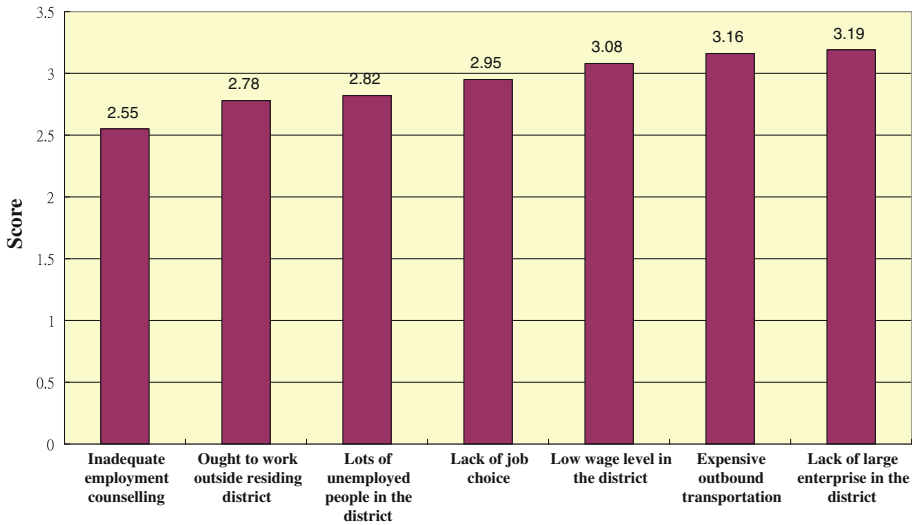
Most elderly respondents in the remote areas were excluded from the labour market and only a few of them could retain their previous unskilled jobs as the demand for unskilled workers in the remote areas was limited. Without income and retirement protection, many of the elderly had to rely on CSSA and Old Age Allowance provided by the government, and lived in poverty.

## 4 Discrimination and Exclusion

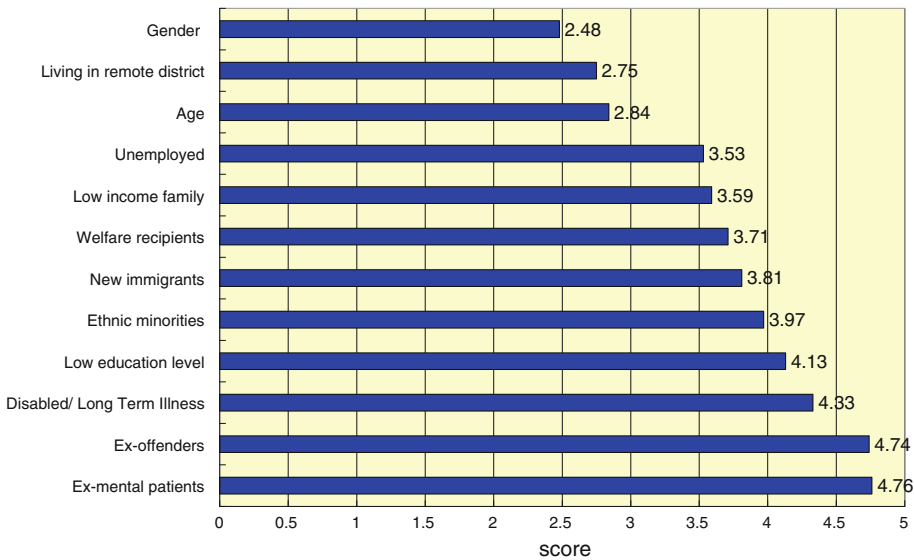
### 4.1 Youth

Youth respondents were asked to rate the impact of seven conditions in their districts, on their employment prospects. Score 1 means no influence while score 5 means very significant influence. The result is shown in Fig. 2. “Lack of large enterprises in the district” was considered to have the most significant impact (score: 3.19) on their employment prospects; the second most significant condition was “expensive outbound transportation” (score: 3.16) and the third one was “low wage level in the district (score: 3.08)”.

<sup>2</sup> The percentage sum is higher than 100% as interviewees could select more than one income source.



**Fig. 2** Influence of different community conditions on employment opportunity—Youth



**Fig. 3** Extent of discrimination against different categories of youth

Youth respondents were also asked to rate the extent of discrimination against 12 different categories of youth. Score 1 means no discrimination while score 7 means very serious discrimination. The result is shown in Fig. 3. “Ex-mental patients” face the maximum discrimination (score: 4.76), “gender” (score: 2.48), “living in remote district” (score: 2.75) and “age” (score: 2.84) were considered to be less discriminatory conditions.

## 4.2 Women

About half of the women workers were part-time workers, mainly engaging in low paid jobs like domestic helper. The main reason for them to choose part-time jobs was to take care of family members. The high commuting cost and the long time it takes to reach other areas make women in the remote areas to prefer part-time jobs in their local districts, as it saves both money and time. Previous experience and skills of these women were not recognized; so they had to accept low paid and low skilled jobs. Their gender, and the care they need to provide to their families, precludes the possibility of working in outside areas, as well as working full-time. It is obvious that gender, combined with the remoteness of the areas, is a strong mechanism that traps the women in low paid part-time jobs.

In a focus group discussion, some women informants explained how the sorting mechanism worked:

“Since we have to take care of our families, we need to stay in this district to search jobs. If we can find jobs in this district, we would not go outside for work. Only if we can’t find jobs in this district, we are forced to go outside. By working within this district, we can save time as well as money. I do want to work full-time but it depends on availability of time. If the job is from eight to six, I can make it. But if the job requires me to work at night, I can’t make it, though there are more vacancies for full-time jobs that require one to work at night. We need to take care of family members. We cannot consider those jobs working at night, so we could only spend less.”

(From: Ms A, female, aged 40 or above, part-time domestic helper, Tai Po resident)

Women workers reported being discriminated against because of age considerations, which intensifies limitations of job opportunities in these remote areas and makes them opt for part-time jobs:

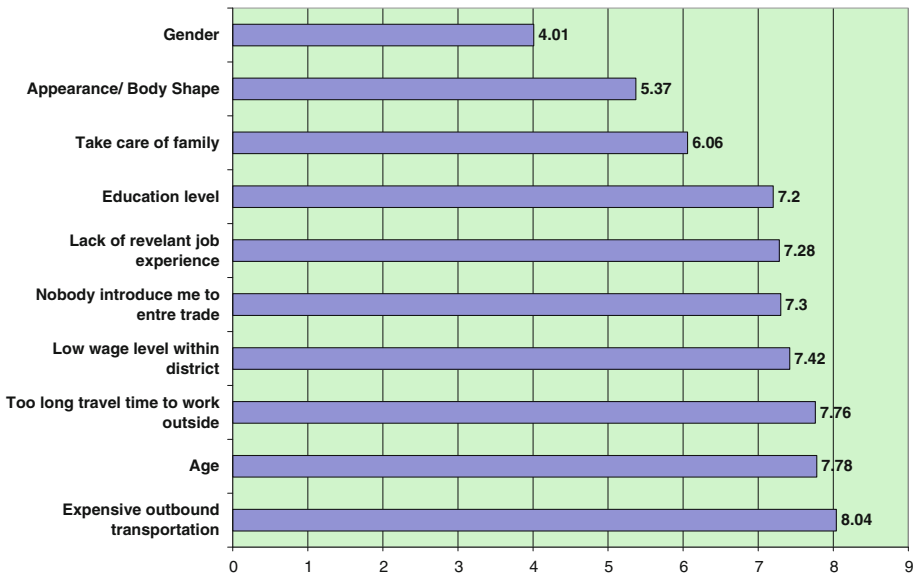
“The first is family problem, the second is age. I was discriminated against by a restaurant 14 years ago. The boss didn’t allow me to work as a waitress. As I urgently needed money at that time, I unwillingly worked as cleaner in the kitchen. I had no alternatives and had to take up the job and lower my expectation and demand. I originally worked in a boutique in Tsim Sha Tsui. In order to have time to take care of my family, I had to abandon my career. However, the pay for full-time jobs was low, so I decided to work part-time, just working for half-a-day. We can find more than one job. Working hours for part time jobs are shorter but the wage may be higher than full-time jobs.”

(From: Ms B, female, aged 35, part-time sales worker, resident of Sheung Shui.)

“As B mentioned, there is still age discrimination. The employers would like to employ women who are young. They don’t employ us, so we have to work as part-time workers. However, whether full-time or part-time, all employers like to employ those who are younger.”

(From: Ms A, female, aged 40 or above, part-time domestic helper, resident of Tai Po.)

Other than family responsibilities, the high commuting cost for residents of remote areas, required to be incurred to travel to Kowloon and/or Hong Kong Island, was the most important barrier to these women getting full-time well paid jobs. The unemployed women



**Fig. 4** Negative impact of different factors on success in seeking jobs—women

were asked about the negative impact of ten conditions on success in seeking jobs, with “score 1” meaning totally no influence and “score 10” meaning serious influence. Among the ten conditions, “expensive outbound transportation” was rated as the highest barrier, with the highest score of 8.04. Other factors that impeded job opportunities, in the order of impact, were age (score 7.78), long travel time to go outside areas (score 7.76), wage is too low in local district (score 7.42), nobody introduced me to enter trade (score 7.30), no relevant work experience (score 7.28), and educational qualifications (score 7.20). However, gender does not have an important impact on success in getting a job (score 4.01) Fig. 4.

This indicates that the three most important barriers to women in remote areas getting jobs are high commuting cost, the long time it takes to commute to other areas, and age discrimination; family responsibilities and gender are not considered to be major barriers in seeking work as they can easily find part-time jobs in remote areas. The problem faced by women is not “unemployment.” The problem is that most jobs they can access are part-time and low-paid jobs. Therefore, some support to lower the barriers of high travel costs may be effective in helping unemployed women get back into the labour market, and in helping part-time women workers get full-time jobs outside the remote areas. Both outcomes can increase family incomes and alleviate their poverty.

### 4.3 Elderly

With regard to the quality of life of the elderly, let us first consider the various factors that could affect their social lives. It was measured by a 10-point Likert scale with 1 meaning no effect at all and 10 meaning a very negative effect. “Not able to afford the transportation cost for social interactions” was the most critical factor, with an average score of 4.39. The second most important factor was “not able to afford the necessary spending for

**Table 2** Negative effects on social lives of elderly by different factors

|  | Average score for<br>CSSA-receivers | Average score for<br>Non-CSSA receivers | Average score for all<br>elderly respondents |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Not able to afford the transportation cost for social interactions | 4.74                                | 4.22                                    | 4.39   |
| Not able to afford the necessary spending for the gathering*       | 4.90                                | 3.81                                    | 4.17   |
| Not able to afford the travel time for social interactions         | 3.94                                | 3.25                                    | 3.48   |
| Taking care of the elderly and the sick people at home             | 1.93                                | 2.05                                    | 1.97   |
| Taking care of children  | 1.69                                | 1.53                                    | 1.58   |

\*  $p < 0.05$ , score 1 means no effect at all while score 10 means very negative effect

the gathering,” with a score of 4.17, whereas the third factor was “not able to afford the travel time for social interactions,” with a score of 3.48. Lastly, “taking care of the elderly and the sick at home” and “taking care of children” had only small effects, with scores of 1.97 and 1.58, respectively.

Poverty also had an obvious negative effect on social lives of the elderly. Referring to Table 2, the effect of “not able to afford the necessary spending for the gathering” on elderly persons receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) was obviously higher than that on elderly persons who do not receive CSSA, their scores being 4.90 and 3.81, respectively ( $F = 5.227$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). With regard to “not able to afford the transportation cost for social interactions,” the negative effect on CSSA-receivers (score 4.74) was larger than that on non-CSSA receivers (score 4.22). For the item “not able to afford the travel time for social interactions” also, the negative effect on CSSA-receivers (score 3.94) was larger than that on non-CSSA receivers (score 3.25). However, the difference between CSSA-receivers and non-CSSA receivers in these two items is not statistically significant.

## 5 Social Network and Social Capital

In terms of social networks and social capital, the average number of friends for elderly, women and youth were 20.9, 21.6 and 18.0, respectively. For women and youth, the number of trustworthy friends is 9.0 and 9.9, respectively, whereas elderly respondents had only 3.8 trustworthy friends, on average. Women respondents had 9.0 friends on average for social interaction, while the elderly had only 3.8 friends. The elderly clearly have relatively smaller social networks than women and youth, implying weaker bonding social capital of the elderly in remote areas (Table 3).

It shows that though women and youth respondents living in remote areas may face material deprivation, they still have friends to interact with, and to trust. It seems that though they are poor, they are not lonely. However, the quality of social networks of the elderly is relatively poor, as they have only 5.7 friends, on average, for social interaction, and only 3.8 trustworthy friends. The elderly in remote areas have friends, but their relations and interactions with friends are not really deep.

**Table 3** Comparison of social networks for elderly, women and youth in remote areas

| Comparison of social networks for elderly, women and youth  |                            |                          |                          |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|   | Average number for elderly | Average number for women | Average number for youth |
| Number of friends   | 20.9                       | 21.6                     | 18.0                     |
| Number of friends living in the same district   | 14.9                       | 13.9                     | NA                       |
| Number of friends for social interaction  | 5.7                        | 9.0                      | NA                       |
| Number of trustworthy friends   | 3.8                        | 9.0                      | 9.9                      |
| Number of relatives or friends who could provide financial assistance in case of financial difficulty | 0.7                        | 4.8                      | 6.0                      |
| Number of friends who could introduce jobs  | NA                         | 3.7                      | 5.0                      |

NA Not Applicable—no such item

We can also observe that both women and elderly have about two-thirds of their friends living in the same district.<sup>3</sup> This shows that elderly and women respondents have a good neighbourhood network of friends' but they do not have many friends outside their living areas as the high travel cost prohibits them from interacting with friends living outside the remote areas.

The most apparent discrepancy lies in the number of friends who could provide assistance in case of financial difficulty. The elderly only had 0.7 relatives or friends who could provide financial aid to them whereas women and youths have 4.8 and 6.0 friends, respectively. The youth have 5.0 friends on average who could introduce them to jobs, while women respondents have only 3.7 friends. Nevertheless, the small number of friends who could provide financial help, or could introduce the elderly, women and youth to jobs, signifies the homogenous nature of social capital of residents in the remote areas.

68.7% of youth respondents reported that the situations of their friends were similar to their own, whereas only 22.2% claimed that the situations of their friends were better than theirs. It is evident that most of the youth are making friends with youth of similar backgrounds (low skilled and low education). Moreover, 64% of youth respondents admitted that the number of their friends living in the same district was much greater than that living outside the district. This shows that social networks of the youth in these remote areas are closed and homogenous. As they seldom interact with people of different backgrounds and different regions, the information they can get, and their channels for getting jobs, are limited.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper summarises the results from three surveys carried out under the “Research on Poverty, Discrimination and Exclusion in Remote Areas of Hong Kong” and reports the poverty and employment situation, discrimination in employment, and social exclusion. Unemployment and poverty are evident among all survey respondents in the remote areas, but the causes and forms are different for the youth, women and elderly. For youth

<sup>3</sup> This item is not included in the youth survey.

respondents, their poverty is mainly caused by the limited job opportunities in the remote areas, and the high youth unemployment rate in neighbouring communities. Furthermore, youth respondents tend to work within the remote areas to keep their commuting costs down. Over-supply of low skilled labour in the remote areas lower the wage level of the youth working in these remote areas.

Women also face limited job opportunities, over-supply of low-skilled workers and high commuting costs. However, the main problem faced by women respondents is poverty caused by part-time employment. About half of the working women among the respondents are engaged in part-time employment and their average monthly income is \$3,304, which is much lower than the \$8,254 average monthly income of full-time women workers.

Availability of part-time jobs, mainly as domestic helpers, varies in different areas. Areas with mixed types of housing and heterogeneous backgrounds of residents, like Tai Po, provide more part-time job opportunities for women, while areas with homogenous backgrounds (of residents) like Yuen Long and Tin Shui Wai provide less part-time job opportunities. Owing to limited job opportunities, the wage level of part-time working women in these homogenous areas is lower than women in heterogeneous areas. Furthermore, not all part-time women workers have low incomes. Those who can get multiple part-time jobs have incomes comparable to full-time women workers.

For the elderly, their hidden unemployment problem is similar to that of women respondents, since both have much lower labour force participation rates than their counterparts in the whole of Hong Kong. Elderly respondents have the intention to continue to work but they do not actually seek jobs as they think that employers are not willing to hire them and their health condition is poor. Poverty problem of the elderly in the remote areas is signified by the high proportion of those receiving welfare benefits, which is their major source of income. Over 40% and 33% of the elderly respondents receive Old Age Allowance and CSSA, respectively, and the average monthly household income of the elderly is only \$4,450.

## 7 Implications

Unemployment and working poverty in remote areas are caused by the remote geographical locations of areas (they are far from the major trade and industry centres) and the lopsided planning of the new towns, i.e. they have homogenous populations, which limits job opportunities. The combined effect is that there are insufficient job opportunities for residents to work within the areas where they live. Both the youth and the women complain about the high cost of commuting to areas where jobs are available, which limits their employment options, especially in case of youth and women with low skills and inadequate educational backgrounds. It is not cost effective for them to travel long hours and spend a large proportion of their meagre incomes on transportation and, therefore, they tend to seek jobs within the remote areas. Consequently, their social networks and social capital are also limited. Owing to the over-supply of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the remote areas, the wage level is low. Low wages of youth and women further deter them from investing in their own human capital, keeping them trapped in poverty. Subsidised travel for residents in the remote areas to commute to urban centres can be an effective means to increase their incomes and alleviate their poverty.

“Work” does not just provide means of living, but it is also a way for human beings to utilise their potential. “Work” also enables a dignified and meaningful life for the elderly. Though the elderly may not get back to the formal labour market for a paid job, their

ability and experience, however, can be utilised in the community economic development projects where they can engage in “work” that may not be the same as a “job”.

The youth respondents are not very conscious of being discriminated against on the basis of age, gender or living in a remote area, while women are sensitive about age discrimination but accept their traditional responsibility to take care of their families. All the three groups of respondents, youth, women and elderly, believe that the high cost of commuting to work is an important factor that keeps them from joining the labour market, seeking higher paying jobs and having social gatherings and interactions with friends. It seems that the respondents are more sensitive about exclusion effect of living in the remote areas than the effect of discrimination because of gender and education.

A large number of elderly respondents who have social networks in urban areas are living in remote areas and since they “cannot afford the transportation cost of social interaction”, they tend to reduce their interactions with their original social networks.

Though living in poverty, the elderly, women and youth in remote areas still have some bonding social capital, and tend to have friends with similar backgrounds (i.e. no work) living in the same district. However, the homogenous nature of their social networks lowers the quality of social capital in these remote areas. Special attention, however, should be paid to social networks and social capital of the elderly as they have fewer friends with whom they can have social interaction and from whom they can get financial help, than women and youth.

Building and maintaining “bridging” social capital, especially social interactions and trustworthy relations with heterogeneous groups, would be a good strategy to alleviate poverty among the youth and the women, and to solve the problem of loneliness among the elderly. To alleviate poverty and social exclusion in the remote areas, the government may allocate more resources to provide social services in these areas, and for social enterprises and community economic development schemes in these remote areas, by encouraging long-term unemployed youth, part-time women workers and the elderly with better health in the district to help and care for those who are less healthy or more vulnerable.

The government can encourage able elderly and women homemakers to participate more in informal social support services (including shopping, visiting, cleaning, repairing and clinic visiting support services, etc.). Not only can these measures improve their bonding social capital, but also provide greater opportunities for social interactions in the community, and help build heterogeneous social capital among them. Such measures would definitely have a positive effect on improving community social networks and enhancing social capital at the community level.

The government can also provide residents who participate in the aforementioned informal social support services with hourly volunteer allowance, as well as transportation allowance, so as to encourage the youth, women and elderly living in poverty to participate in volunteer services. Through putting their basic working skills and experience to use, they will be able to lead more enriching lives.

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