Empowerment and Grassroots Women in Hong Kong:

A Case Study of Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association

A project undertaken in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the B.Soc.Sc. (Hons) in Applied Sociology (East and Southeast Asia)
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by

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, with the local economic transformation driven by globalization, grassroots women in Hong Kong started to face increasingly serious employment problems like overlong working hours, low wages and unemployment. All of these problems have posed negative influences on women’s everyday life. In this regard, both older and newly-established women’s concern groups sought to adopt various empowerment strategies for enhancing the personal, interpersonal and political power of grassroots women.

This research project aims at delving into the women’s empowerment strategies adopted by local women’s organizations and their effectiveness through applying such qualitative research methods as the case study method, historiography and in-depth interviews. Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association, as one of the local women’s concern groups, was selected to be a case for study. The focus was on the strategies taken by the Association for empowering grassroots women as well as how effective these strategies are.

The research framework was constructed mainly by reviewing women’s empowerment strategies and the evaluation approach. Consciousness raising, skill training, collectivization and leadership training are the major strategies used by the Association, and the results of evaluation showed that such strategies tend to be highly effective. The author tried to argue that the high effectiveness of the strategies is attributable to the relevant programmes of particular empowerment strategies.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research project would not have been completed without the conducive, constructive and professional advice rendered by my supervisor, Dr. Catherine C. H. Chiu. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to her. Over the past several months, she has always been ready to put her own endeavor on helping me overcome any problems pertinent to my study. To be honest, my academic success within this three-year Bachelor’s Degree programme is based very much on her enlightenment and encouragement.

I am also grateful to the staff members of Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association for their friendly and valuable assistance in inviting some of their women participants to be my interviewees. Much more appreciation is given to all of my respondents for their willingness in accepting my interviews.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my mother and grandmother for their love and support that are important to motivate me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE PAGE</th>
<th>i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ONE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1. Current Situation of Grassroots Women in Hong Kong</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Local Women’s Concern Groups and Empowerment of Grassroots Women</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. Objectives of this Research Project</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4. Organization of the Project</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TWO</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Definition of Women’s Empowerment</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Strategies for Women’s Empowerment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. Evaluative Criteria for Women’s Empowerment Strategies</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4. Concluding Remarks</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THREE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Reasons for Applying Qualitative Research Methods</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. Reasons for Choosing the Case Study Method</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3. Reasons for Applying Historiography and In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOUR</td>
<td>HONG KONG WOMEN WORKERS’ ASSOCIATION (WWA) AND ITS EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.1. Brief Introduction to WWA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2. Empowerment Programmes of WWA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIVE</td>
<td>WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES IN THE EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES OF WWA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.1. Evaluation of the Empowerment Strategies Adopted by WWA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIX</td>
<td>DISCUSSION &amp; CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.1. Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2. Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I</td>
<td>In-depth interview guide for WWA’s organizers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix II</td>
<td>In-depth interview guide for WWA’s participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The number of employed persons by gender and monthly income (2000)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The monthly income median by sex and occupation (1996-2002)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Objectives of specific empowerment strategies</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Evaluative criteria for the effectiveness of the empowerment strategies</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Profile of interviewees – WWA’ s organizers</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Profile of interviewees – WWA’ s participants</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Expected training quota, number of graduates and employment, employment rate and training cost for domestic helper retrainees</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Retrainee Profile - By Sex</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Results of the survey about the disparity in having access to computers and the Internet in Hong Kong</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Major types of social enterprise</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cases of industrial disputes followed up by Labour Service Centre by items</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hourly wages of grassroots occupations</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Results of evaluation: criteria the empowerment strategies can meet</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.1. Current Situation of Grassroots Women in Hong Kong

Since the 1980s, Hong Kong started to undergo a transformation from the secondary-industry focused to the tertiary-industry based economy under the driving force of economic globalization, which also led a huge number of manufacturing factories to move to other places (Hong Kong Women Development Association [HKWDA] 2005). With the growth of this newly emerged industry, the labour market demands those who are younger-aged with good education attainment. As far as the situation of grassroots women is concerned, most of them are lowly educated. Although the Hong Kong Government implemented free primary education project since 1971 (Yu et al. 2004), it was not until 1979 the 9-year free and compulsory education began to be fully carried out by the Hong Kong Government (Morris 1997). Before the implementation of this educational policy, grassroots women tended to quit schooling to work outside for supplementing the familial income and let their brothers receive education partly because of “the shadow of the patriarchal family” (Leung 1995: 36) and partly because of the low household income level. Hence, most of these women could only have primary education attainment at most. They worked as factory workers in the younger age during the 1970s, but now they have already become middle-aged. Given that women suffer from more employment barriers like age discrimination than do men in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Women Worker’s Association [hereafter WWA] 2006), it is difficult for the grassroots women to find their jobs in the knowledge-based economy. In fact, this age discrimination entails an element of sexism since employers in the service sector tend to have a bias against middle-aged women by thinking that they do not have enough working abilities and, more importantly, good appearance that is crucial for attracting customers. In other words, these employers hold prejudice against not
just the age of women but also their physical characteristics (The Hong Kong Council of Social Service 2002; WWA 2006). As Leung (1995) notes, employers in the service sector are reluctant to appoint women over the age of 35. Worse still, the governmental outsourcing scheme or privatization of public services also leads grassroots women to be unemployed and have adverse working conditions, such as low wages, long working hours, underemployment, etc. (WWA 2006). It is because under privatization of public services, private companies are not regulated by the government and they have autonomy to hire or fire, set wages and working hours. Grassroots women who are old and lowly educated do not have enough bargaining power but have to comply with these poor arrangements.

In Hong Kong nowadays, grassroots women (and men) refer to those whose monthly income is $5,000 or below (The Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Women Affairs Committee 2006) (see also Table 1).

**Table 1: The number of employed persons by gender and monthly income (2000)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly income (HK Dollar)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number in person ('000)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;3,000</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,000 - 3,999</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>201.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,000 - 4,999</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>156.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000 - 5,999</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>119.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,000 - 6,999</td>
<td>101.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>212.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7,000 - 7,999</td>
<td>115.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>235.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8,000 - 8,999</td>
<td>171.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>245.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9,000 - 9,999</td>
<td>119.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>249.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 - 14,999</td>
<td>534.2</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>693.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,000 - 19,999</td>
<td>236.9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>377.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000 - 29,999</td>
<td>228.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>456.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 30,000</td>
<td>227.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>454.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median ($)</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>8,500</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
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Source: Poon and Ng 2003: 21, Table 5; original data from Census and Statistics Department 2000.

* The percentage comprised of the total employed population.
The above table indicates that there are obviously more women than men earning $5,000 or below per month, which could also be contended that the number of women is far greater than men at the grassroots level. Because they are lowly educated and some of them are middle-aged, these grassroots women, including those who are paid and unpaid workers, face the most serious difficulties pertaining to employment and livelihood than do their counterparts at the higher social classes. Such difficulties might include unemployment, marginalization at work, poverty resulted from gender inequality, etc. (WWA 2006). As regards both unemployment and marginalization at work, WWA (2006) shows that in the fourth season of 2004 the number of unemployed women and underemployed women were 89,200 and 40,500 respectively. Simply speaking, among the population of every 12 women workers there is one woman suffering from unemployment or underemployment. Although I could not find any statistical data that exactly shows the unemployment number of grassroots women (or those whose monthly income is $5,000 or below), it can still be inferred that amongst the 89,200 unemployed women workers most of them, if not all, are grassroots women due to their lower education attainment and older age. Not surprisingly, the problem of marginalization at work facing grassroots women is pretty obvious in the sense that they often work as a part-time worker, receive low pay and work overlong. Poon (2005) illustrates that among 1,200 grassroots women whose monthly income is less than $5,000 there are 64% of them are part-time, temporary, contracted and day labour, and the reason for them to work as such kinds of labour is more to do with their childcare responsibility at home. Yet, no matter whether they are part-time or temporary workers, their income stability cannot be guaranteed. Even though they work as full-time labour, these grassroots women still could not earn higher income since most of their jobs are non-technical in nature (Chan 2006) (also refer to Table 2).
Table 2: Median monthly income by sex and occupation (1996-2002)

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<tr>
<td>Executive &amp; Manager</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>26,400</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>26,400</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>30,800</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>9,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service &amp; Shop Salesperson</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>6,600</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
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<td>Handicraft or related</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
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<td>Machine Operator &amp; Fabricator</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5,300</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Technical worker</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>7,500</td>
<td>7,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>8,800</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>11,700</td>
<td></td>
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Source: Census and Statistics Department 2004, Table 1.3.

Table 2 reflects not just the fact that the income of non-technical worker is the lowest among the occupations listed above but also the problem “equal job but unequal pay” facing grassroots women as non-technical workers tends to be the most serious. There are even 80% of women who only receive $3,900 or below each month among the population with the same income level (Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2005), which is resulted not purely from their low education level but also from age or “appearance discrimination” (WWA 2006) against them. All these data reveal that women are the majority in comparison to men at the grassroots level and women at this social class are exploited most intensely.
With regard to the long working time, the research by Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People’s Livelihood (2005) shows that the working time for 0.74 million workers exceeds 10 hours per day, whereas that for grassroots workers exceeds 11 hours per day. Although these data merely indicates a small difference in the working time between grassroots labour and other workers, and address the problem of overlong working time for grassroots labour as a whole rather than only grassroots women, these could still support that grassroots women are exploited more intensely in terms of working hours since, as mentioned before, there are more women than men at the grassroots level.

Given the fact that most of the grassroots women do part-time jobs and receive low pay, those who have got married do not have enough economic power to be independent but have to depend on their husbands financially. The heavy reliance on their husbands economically, in turn, dampens grassroots women’s “consciousness of self-value” (Hong Kong Women Development Association [HKWDA] 2005), which then leads them to think that they are less able to be independent by their own abilities. Because of inadequate familial income and the lack of power in decision-making, these grassroots women not only have to go outside for earning money to support the familial income but also need to take care of children after work. And both of the tasks always lead them to face a “double exploitation” (Wong 1995: 67). On one hand they are deprived by their husbands to act as an unpaid worker and bear the role of wives and mothers to do reproductive work at home; on the other hand they are exploited to receive low pay by employers who regard their participation in wage labour as a “supplementary activity” (Chan 1986: 41, cited in Leung 1995: 33) in the sense that their wages are just supplementary to their husbands’ incomes. This phenomenon can further be owed to the influences of sexism in the workplace. Leung (1995) demonstrates that due to the persistence of gender discrimination, women are paid less than men at similar work, and they even receive lower remunerations than their male counterparts with the same education level. This scholar further shows that the women’s role as the caretaker of both children and the
family is a factor leading to the persistence of sexism (Leung 1995). As employers hold prejudice against married women by thinking that their role is to help their husbands raise children, their economic activity is hence deemed as a supplement in nature. This kind of discrimination causes the lower income level for women.

Pearson and Leung (1995: 5) imply that sexism against women could somehow be attributed to the impacts of patriarchy which, as a legacy of traditional Chinese culture, is “a system of dominance of men over women based essentially on a sexual division of labour, assigning women a domestic and hence economically dependent role”. It is noticed that women, especially those from the lower social class, bear double burden. As shown by Ng (1995: 79), “it is the woman (typically the female household head) who still performs the lion’s share of the children and everyday household tasks”. He further implies that irrespective of what social classes they belong to, women in Hong Kong today still bear such a domestic role (Ng 1995). It reveals that patriarchal ideology still persists in Hong Kong and could be seen as a determinant of women’s role as household’s caretakers. That’s why Pearson and Leung (1995) maintain that the impacts of traditional Chinese patriarchy must be included, associated with Hong Kong’s current social, economic and political conditions, in explaining gender inequality or sexism against women.

The women’s role also gives rise to some stereotypes applied to women in addition to the consolidation of sexism. Lippa (2002) uses social role theory to argue that gender stereotyping originates from social gender roles. The expected role of childbearing makes “people perceive women to be more nurturing”, while that of assuming competitive work makes “people perceive men to be more assertive than women” (Lippa 2002: 95). As a result of such stereotypes, employers give women lower pay since they perceive that women are good at nurturing and staying home for caring kids and the family, so their values in the labour market are thus lower than men who are more assertive and can perform better in the workplace. In other words, both sexism and gender stereotypes resulted from social gender
roles determine women’s lower income at work. On top of such universal explanations, why grassroots women (married and unmarried) receive low pay in the public sphere is also related to the fact that since Hong Kong is a capitalist economy, the oversupply of grassroots workers gives way to employers to maximize their profits by lowering the wages of these women. In fact, grassroots women have no choices to refuse receiving lower income. It is because their low education level makes them less able to bargain with employers to enhance their wages. More importantly, these women might not find it very easy to seek other jobs in the labour market since there are many women with the same social background competing for low-paid jobs mutually (The Hong Kong Council of Social Service 2004). In any event, all the above employment problems exclude grassroots women from decision-making processes in daily life, like making decisions on how much money they spend on areas they want, and how much time they allocate to take part in community activities that enable these women to develop their own social networks and absorb new knowledge so that they may find other jobs with better conditions. Consequently, these women might lack the control over their own lives. What’s more, these employment problems, which are mainly resulted from several forms and conditions of oppression that include stereotyping as well as domination of patriarchal culture (GlenMaye 1998), lead grassroots women to have negative psychological states. They thus tend to be less motivated to overcome their difficulties. WWA (2003) stresses that the pressures deriving from temporary unemployment or marginal living situation stifle the self-confidence and motivation of grassroots women workers in the social life nowadays. Most of the women have given up on job seeking when facing difficulties, and hence become a “discouraged worker” (WWA 2003). They, then, experience a more adverse everyday life, such as having less control over assets or resources, being further excluded from decision-making processes, and the like.
1.2. Local Women’s Concern Groups¹ and Empowerment of Grassroots Women

Because of the serious impacts of employment problems on grassroots women, some older women’s organizations like the Women’s Centre today therefore extend their concerns towards grassroots women in tandem with the trend of “popularization” (Lai et al. 1997: 291) that began in the third stage of local women’s movement since the 1980s. A number of new women’s groups were also established to provide help for them in order to promote their participation in gaining control over their lives in society, which is the core meaning of women’s empowerment (Wallerstein and Berstein 1988, cited in Fung 1994). In general, the new women’s organizations that concern the situation of grassroots women are those that were founded around two decades ago. The Association for the Advancement of Feminism (HKAAF), which was established in 1984, is one of the women’s organizations concerning local grassroots women. It empowers grassroots women through offering some training programmes in which they absorb skills and knowledge so that they can become leaders in women’s work and give assistance to other women’s groups (Lai et al. 1997). Thus, not only can grassroots women inside the HKAAF get more control over their own lives, but those who are outsiders can also be empowered indirectly by this women’s organization. Another representative is the Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association (WWA) formed in 1989, and it encourages grassroots women to actively engage in the daily operation of the organization. For example, it employs grassroots women to work as executive committee members, staff and voluntary workers so as to facilitate them to achieve higher degree of self-consciousness and self-growth that are essential for them to control their personal lives (WWA 1999). Other women’s organizations, including the Eastern District New Women Federation, the Women Development Project in Shau Kei Wan, Caritas-Hong Kong, to name but a few, were also established between the 1980s and the early 1990s for empowering women at the grassroots level by various ways (Lai et al. 1997).

¹ In this project, the terms “women’s concern group”, “women’s group” and “women’s organization” are used interchangeably.
Undoubtedly, much has been written on the role of women’s groups as well as their strategies for empowering grassroots women (e.g., Cheung 1989; Lu 2004; Purushothaman 1998; Singh 2000), but most of the studies are pertinent to such foreign countries as Taiwan and India. Research related to Hong Kong women’s groups and empowering strategies is quite scarce in actuality. Even though Cheung’s study puts a focus on one of the Hong Kong women’s concern groups – that is, The Women’s Center, it seems to be based on secondary-data collection method and confined to be description- and summary-oriented with a limited theoretical framework. Certainly, Cheung (1989) has already illustrated that the promotion of self-awareness or consciousness-raising and the development of competence are important strategies of empowering grassroots women, which are very similar to the approaches taken by the women’s self-growth groups in Taipei since they also emphasize “notions of ‘self-consciousness,’ ‘self-autonomy,’ ‘independence,’ and ‘growth’” (Lu 2004: 226). Yet, Cheung’s study does not analyze what rationales these strategies entail or why the Women’s Center adopted them to empower women at the grassroots level in a deeper way. As a result, this research project is an attempt to study how local women’s groups empower grassroots women and the effects of empowering strategies on these women in a relatively much deeper level.

1.3. Objectives of this Research Project

As mentioned before, employment problems could affect personalities of grassroots women and their personal motivation to do something for overcoming their difficulties, which in turn influences their everyday life. It is believed that as long as grassroots women are empowered, their individual perceptions would be changed and their economic conditions and livelihoods would therefore be changed as well. GlenMaye (1998: 35) emphasizes that “[e]mpowerment for women includes personal, interpersonal, and cultural-changing thoughts and actions that together bring about real increases in the personal and political power of
women”. Indeed, the term “personal power” has already been defined earlier as “individuals’ abilities to control their destiny and influence their surroundings”, whereas “political power” is “the ability to change systems, redistribute resources, expand opportunity structures and create social change through social action” (Hartman 1990, cited in Shera and Wells 1999: 3). So, when a grassroots woman is empowered, her state of mind would be changed (like having stronger sense of power) so that she would be more motivated to overcome her employment problems, which eventually enables her to have higher economic power with better control over personal lives. It is known that there are local women’s groups using various ways to empower grassroots women. Yet, whether or not grassroots women are empowered successfully hinges very much on the effectiveness of strategies adopted by women’s groups. However, as shown in the last section, there is a scarcity of academic research studying the strategies for Hong Kong women’s groups to empower grassroots women in depth. It is, therefore, worth to delve into the local women’s group approaches to empowering grassroots women and the effectiveness of the strategies for grassroots women’s empowerment. In this regard, this research project chooses the Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association (WWA), as a case study, and aims at studying these research questions (1) what are the strategies adopted by WWA for empowering grassroots women? and (2) how effective are these empowerment strategies? This project is significant in learning more about the process in which local women’s organizations improve the livelihoods of grassroots women through implementing a series of empowering measure. It will also increase our understanding of the experiences of the women during and after participation in the empowerment programmes.

1.4. Organization of this Project

In the next chapter, I review the strategies for women’s empowerment in order to establish some research guidelines, including the characteristics of the empowerment
strategies, rationale as well as objectives. For the purpose of answering my first research question, I use historiography and in-depth interviews. Such research guidelines do help me to find out what the empowerment strategies are taken by WWA. The relevant approach for evaluating the effectiveness of the empowerment strategies is reviewed which would be used for studying how effective WWA’s empowerment strategies are. In Chapter Three, the methods of data collection are presented and some reasons behind selecting these methods are also provided. The subsequent two chapters examine the empowerment strategies adopted by WWA and their effectiveness. In the final chapter, I recapitulate all major research findings and present a conclusion.
CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I would like to define women’s empowerment, review the strategies for empowering women and the approach for evaluating their effectiveness so as to construct the research framework as a guideline for studying the research questions.

2.1. Definition of Women’s Empowerment

Empowerment is a socio-political concept which is widely applied in various spheres like education, management, labour unions, health care, and so forth. It was in the mid-1970s that this concept started to be used in the sphere of the women’s movement (Stromquist 1995). Although women are not an exclusive target group of empowerment, the term “empowerment” is instead more relevant to them since they have been generalized as a marginalized group (Medal-Anonuevo and Bochynek 1995). One of the commonly accepted definitions is that empowerment is a process. Gutierrez (1990: 149, quoted in GlenMaye 1998: 35 and in Miley 1999: 2) defines empowerment as the “process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations”. Another scholar, Mc Whirter (1991, cited in Rowlands 1997: 51), also suggests empowerment is:

the process by which people, organizations or groups who are powerless a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life contest, b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and d) support the empowerment of others in their community.

Though others like Olawoye (1999) and Parpart et al. (2002) regard empowerment as both a means and an end, they still do not deny the argument that empowerment is a process. Parpart et al. (2002: 9) further note “[a]t the level of individual development […] It is a process of developing individual capacities through gaining education and skills in order to
empower individuals to fight for a better quality of life”. What’s more, empowerment can 
“include the development of a state of mind (a sense of power, efficacy, competence) and the 
modification of structural conditions in order to reallocate power” (Swift and Levin 1987, 
cited in GlenMaye 1998: 35). Fung (1994) has a similar but more detailed illustration that 
empowerment is a process “a) from their alienation, isolation, or low self esteem, sense of 
powerlessness, fatalism etc. or the negative valuation, b) to a sense of personal power and 
control, critical consciousness, attaining skills to foster change, and assuming personal 
responsibility to work towards social change”. All in all, these definitions simultaneously 
stipulate that empowerment is more than a process of enhancing power. It is also a 
multi-level process involving individual, interpersonal and political or community levels. To 
put differently, in the empowerment process, personal, interpersonal as well as political 
power could be enhanced. Miley (1999) explains that while personal power is the ability to 
get what one needs and control personal destiny, interpersonal power is the ability to 
influence the ways that others think, feel, act, or believe. Political power refers to the ability 
to organize and mobilize in order to change systems, redistribute resources, expand 
opportunity structures and create social change (Miley 1999; Stromquist 1995). In fact, these 
three levels of empowerment process are to a large extent interrelated. Parpart et al. (2002) 
emphasizes that empowerment must be understood as encompassing individual 
consciousness (power within), and its importance for collective action (power with) that 
provides power to create change. Simply speaking, the empowerment process starts from the 
personal level. Only when personal power is enhanced can people engage in the process of 
interpersonal and/or political empowerment.

On the other hand, there are a series of definitions specific to women’s empowerment, 
and these specific definitions are complementary with the above mentioned general 
definitions of empowerment and I will try to integrate them to draw a more comprehensive 
definition. One of the definitions pertaining to women’s empowerment is that:
Empowerment enables a woman to gain relative strength as a result of having choices and bargaining power. The consequences could be reduction of invisibility as she is able to demand attention from those concerned, especially decision and policy makers, to generate the appropriate positive responses or elimination of exploitability, availability and use of social services and resources. Ultimately, empowerment should lead to the improvement of women’s socio-economic status (Lazo 1995: 25).

This definition seems to put more focus on the goals of women’s empowerment, but Kabeer (1999, cited in Esplen et al. 2006: 3) deems empowerment as “a process by which those who have been denied power gain power, in particular the ability to make strategic life choices. For women, these could be the capacity to choose a marriage partner, a livelihood, or whether or not to have children”. Another definition given by GlenMaye (1998: 35) is that “[e]mpowerment for women includes personal, interpersonal, and cultural-changing thoughts and actions that together bring about real increases in the personal and political power of women”, which implies that empowerment is not confined to the personal level but involves interpersonal and political levels. What’s more, Boehm and Boehm (2003: 285) show that empowerment can refer to the results of the empowering process, which encompass “feelings of self-respect and self-esteem, a sense of power, control and autonomy, as well as a reallocation of resources, with greater personal and collective access to them”. Based on these interpretations, the integrated definition of women’s empowerment adopted in this project is that:

Women’s empowerment entails the meanings of process and result. It is a multi-level process of enhancing women’s personal, interpersonal and political power, including intrinsic and extrinsic power, so that women can enjoy the results of that process like having the ability to make decisions related to their livelihoods, which in turn enables them to improve their own lives.

In the following section, I am going to review the strategies of empowering women that were suggested and taken by scholars and organizations that concern the livelihoods of women.
2.2. Strategies for Women’s Empowerment

Given that women can be empowered at the personal, interpersonal and political levels, there are various strategies particular for women’s empowerment in each of the levels.

**Strategies for personal empowerment**

*Personal consciousness raising*

This strategy can be seen as the cornerstone of enhancing women’s personal power. Stromquist (2002: 27) notes “[a]wareness of the existence of oppression at the personal level requires recognition of oneself as a victim in particular circumstances or in recurrent social transactions. […] Far from producing a defeatist attitude, the understanding of oneself as a victim is the first step toward redressing the inequity of social and economic treatment”. This statement has pointed out what imperatives consciousness raising has. Generally speaking, personal consciousness raising is a strategy aiming at increasing women’s personal power by encouraging them to express their own feelings, perceptions, needs and experiences in the consciousness-raising programmes (GlenMaye 1998). The reason why there is a need to raise women’s consciousness is that different forms of oppression like stereotyping and domination of patriarchal culture always cause the alienation of women from their selves. GlenMaye (1998) suggests that the alienation of the self has two aspects. The first one is an alienation of a woman from her inner self which entails individuated needs, wants, capabilities, dreams, and intrinsic worth, whereas the second one is an alienation from personhood itself. There is a causal relationship between these two aspects – that is, the denial of the full personhood (the second aspect) results in the inability to identify with an inner self having worth and subjectivity (the first aspect) (GlenMaye 1998). While they cannot identify themselves as subjects, women would be dependent on “external authority for direction” (Belenky et al. 1986: 24, quoted in GlenMaye 1998: 32). In other words, the alienation from the self is a negative psychological state that women deny they are the
subjects with wants, needs, capabilities or worth to be independent but they only depend on others with authority and power, like their families or husbands, for directing their own lives. Under these circumstances, women would not think or feel that they are able to live by themselves, not to mention to control their own destiny. By and large, the alienation or denial of the self can be seen as a situation that women denigrate their self-esteem and self-efficacy since self-esteem is “the evaluation individuals make of themselves and a judgment of their worth” (Coopersmith 1967; Rosenberg 1965, quoted in East 1999: 147), while self-efficacy refers to “one’s belief that one can ‘produce and regulate events in one’s life’” (Bandura 1982: 122, quoted in East 1999: 148). In other words, as far as the alienation of women from their selves is concerned, it means that women lower their self-esteem or evaluate themselves negatively and denigrate their self-efficacy.

In the case of grassroots women in Hong Kong, the problem of alienation from the self also happens to them. As shown by WWA (1999), male domination and gender stereotyping discourage women from having autonomy, self-determination and self-efficacy, and they tend to be dependent, passive, and afraid of making decisions independently. One of the grassroots women who has taken part in a certain WWA-run programme expresses that “the major reason is that I work on a full-time job and when I do the job, I felt so self-abased without dignity at all. It made my personal emotion very depressive and led me to lose self-confidence, especially in interpersonal relationship”, whereas there are other participants who also felt that they lost their “selves” in daily work (WWA 1999). In any event, since lowering self-esteem and self-efficacy represents weakening intrinsic personal power, consciousness raising is thus demanded. Actually, why it is necessary to raise women’s consciousness is related to sexism as well, which comprises the mechanisms by which “men hold power in all the important institutions in society … and women are deprived of access to such power” (Lerner 1986: 239, quoted in GlenMaye 1998: 34). GlenMaye further explains that this unequal distribution of power is obvious in economic resources, personal
status, etc., but there is a “taboo” that prohibits people from seeing and acknowledging male
domination and female powerlessness in the society with sexism which “demands the silent
acquiescence of both the oppressed and the oppressor” (1998: 34). Grassroots women in
Hong Kong also suffer from sexism in the labour market that can be reflected from such
employment problems as unemployment and low income level. In any case, sexism makes
women unable to understand they have an experience of being deprived and define their
experiences in their own language but to be oppressed by silence or forced to use the
oppressor’s language (GlenMaye 1998). It might be another factor that causes women to
alienate from their selves or to lower their own self-esteem and self-efficacy. In more detail,
women who join the related programmes (often in groups) could define their feelings, needs
or experiences in their own language through which women’s consciousness of self can be
developed in the sense that women can understand their own situation. It thus helps alleviate
the problem of alienation from their selves or fosters women to increasingly regard
themselves as a subject with individuated needs, wants, capabilities and intrinsic worth. This
represents that both self-esteem and self-efficacy of the women could be enhanced, which
also means the increase in intrinsic personal power. GlenMaye (1998) provides an example
about a women’s program that is used for raising consciousness of women who have been
battered. The program is called Eastside Domestic Violence Program (EDVP), launched in
the Seattle metropolitan area. In the program, a small-group setting was rendered within
which the “advocate counselors provide labels for the women’s abusive experiences, which
leads to increased awareness of violence, reduces self-blame and shame, and eases the sense
of craziness they feel when trying to understand what has happened to them” (GlenMaye
1998: 44). This example indicates that the process ‘consciousness raising’ allows women to
understand their experiences and increase their self-esteem by taking part in the relevant
programme. Due to its positive functions, Stromquist (2002: 28) notes
“consciousness-raising promotes a belief in women’s autonomy as subjects, it fosters among
participants a sense of their independent worth and needs. It enables women to see themselves as individuals with agency beyond their responsibilities for home and family”.

**Skill training**

In fact, only implementing consciousness raising is not adequate for personal empowerment. Although it can enable women to have a *belief* that they have the capabilities of controlling their own lives, their personal power is merely enhanced psychologically at most. So, to increase women’s actual capabilities or extrinsic power, skill training is therefore needed. Fung (1994) stresses that empowerment needs not only consciousness raising, but also facilitating clients to learn needed skills. Stromquist (2002) also illustrates that since a number of adult women rely on their families and men financially, the strategy of women’s empowerment should combine “the provision of emancipatory gender knowledge with the supply of productive skills, management skills or micro credit” (Stromquist 2002: 33). These two scholars imply that in personal empowerment both consciousness raising and skill training should be carried out simultaneously. Given the education level of local grassroots women is quite low and they might therefore lack some knowledge or skills that are mentioned by Fung and Stromquist, which does not favor them in terms of employment. So, the objectives of the empowerment strategy “skill training” are to increase women’s actual personal power through engaging them in training programmes in which they are provided with chances to learn not only the assertive skill, the problem-solving skill, and the emotion-handling skill (Fung 1994), but also some skills relevant to production and management so that their actual personal power can be enhanced. The women’s concern groups, especially those which are located in the third-world countries, have already adopted ‘skill training’ as their empowerment strategy and formed the saving and credit groups (SCGs) to carry out it. Actually, women in the SCGs can be given chances to absorb various sorts of skills. For instance, women’s organizations in India in the 1980s have formed the
SCGs in which women are provided with chances to learn skills in decision-making and transparency in their working (Purushothaman 1998). In Nepal, the Women’s Economic Empowerment and Literacy Project (WEEL) also lets women participate in the SCGs that gives chances to them to learn skills in marketing, product feasibility and management, record keeping, accounting, and so on (Shrestha 1999, cited in Stromquist 2002). Another case which adopts ‘skill training’ may include the UNDP that has funded the Training Programme as part of its project, Expansion of Skill-based Literacy Programmes for Women. This programme puts a focus on work skills training and stresses skills that women hope and need to know, especially those that are lucrative and enable women to earn higher income. According to Aksornkool (1995), the Training Programme renders opportunities for women to absorb their most desired agricultural skills like making eggs for sale, integrated farming, brick-making, and so forth. Because of the concern that only strengthening women’s productive skills without helping them to lessen their other duties has created additional burdens to women, the programme hence tries to promote sharing of household duty between family members through distributing curricular materials (Aksornkool 1995). Some new subjects like planning, management and entrepreneurial habits are also provided by the Training Programme, which are applicable to various jobs. Aksornkool (1995: 55) comments that under this programme, “[b]uilding up positive self-image and strengthening of women’s self-confidence also receive due attention”. Certainly, there are many other programmes providing chances of skill training, but the main idea is that with the supply of chances to learn skills from such programmes, women can absorb different kinds of practical skills or become more skillful. Stromquist (2002: 33) further notes “[t]hese programmes report high levels of psychological and economic empowerment among their participants”. In other words, the strategy, “skill training”, may enable women to acquire skills for work through giving learning chances to them, which means that women can have not merely stronger actual abilities to control their livelihoods but also higher self-esteem and self-efficacy.
Strategy for interpersonal empowerment

Collectivization

The empowerment process starts from the personal level, so women can participate in the process of other levels of empowerment, including interpersonal empowerment certainly, when their personal power is enhanced. Fung (1994) shows that some people who belong to social vulnerable groups would “isolate themselves from their groups and the rest of community”. With respect to grassroots women locally, a study conducted by Ng (1991, cited in Leung 1995) on married women from low-income families in Tuen Mun reveals that the majority of the respondents have never joined any voluntary association and they scarcely participated in activities rendered by public organizations because of double burden and all the above circumstances do not favor them from having collective awareness and even stronger interpersonal skills, not to mention social networking. Women’s interpersonal empowerment can be achieved by using the strategy for enhancing women’s collective awareness, that is, “collectivization” which stands for a process of enhancing the awareness towards the functions of collectivity or gathering into groups (hereafter awareness of collectivity) (Fung 1994). This strategy has the objectives of engaging women in the process of knowing the functions of collectivity or groups – that is, learning mutual-aid and problem-tackling skills in the relevant programme and women’s awareness of collectivity can thus be enhanced upon the condition that they have undergone the process of understanding the functions of collectivity. The increase in collective awareness would, in turn, represent the enhancement of women’s interpersonal power (East 1999). Either the small group or the mutual-aid group is an essential format of the related programme of this strategy (Fung 1994). East (1999: 150) comments that the major means for enhancing women’s interpersonal power can be “the use of support and psycho-educational groups” in which “[w]omen identify their own concerns that they want help with and this is combined with structured exercises to facilitate discussions. […] Some structure, with enough flexibility to let the women control
the group agenda, has been most effective”. Fung (1994) mentions that the mutual aid group can play a role of fostering mutual aid and effective learning of problem-tackling skills. These skills are already equal to interpersonal skills (Gutierrez 1998). In any case, ‘collectivization’ as a strategy for interpersonal empowerment is implemented by means of mutual-support or small groups because, on the one hand, these groups are the must for knowing the functions of collectivity and, on the other hand, they have advantages of facilitating this process.

So far, we have noticed that most of the empowerment strategies’ aims are fulfilled by using the corresponding programmes that are groups in format. In actuality, the mutual aid group has originally been contended by the interactionist approach that is deemed as a stepping stone to an empowerment approach (Lee 1994). Lee (1994: 210) further explains that “[t]he group is a microcosm of social interaction. […] The group can serve therapeutic (personal) and/or sociopolitical goals. The key element of the approach is reciprocity, and the worker is seen as a mediator and enabler relative to the group’s purpose. […] The applicability of this approach to an empowerment approach lies in its appreciation of reciprocity and the strength of the group itself as a mutual aid and self-empowering system”. Lee’s statement has implied the multi-purpose nature of the mutual aid group in the sense that it can be taken as a means for implementing the strategies at any levels of empowerment. In the mutual aid group, participants “are viewed as active and having the power to make a difference in the group, as social beings who need to belong, and as social learners who help each other in learning. They establish bonds, empathy, and identification” (Lee 1994: 211). Furthermore, Lee (1994) shows that when the mutual aid group is used for ‘consciousness raising’, homogeneity of members’ characteristics like gender, race, sexual orientation or commonality of situation can help reach the aim of the strategy. All the above show that the mutual-aid group can serve to be used as a format of the relevant empowerment programmes.
Strategies for political empowerment

Political consciousness raising

As illustrated above, personal consciousness raising is a process of enabling women to identify their own feelings, perceptions, needs and experiences so as to increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Nevertheless, this individual aspect of consciousness raising is the strategy for personal empowerment and merely confined to let women learn more about their experiences and needs with stronger intrinsic personal power. The other way round, the political aspect of consciousness raising is more than a process aiming at increasing women’s understanding of their experiences and needs. Rather, it has also a purpose of enhancing their awareness towards “the personal is political” (East 1999: 151). According to Chao et al. (2006), “the personal is political” is a concept that stipulates the direct connection between the society and individuals. To understand the political issue about the situation of all women is to understand women’s individual lives since there is a close linkage between male’s domination over female in the public sphere and that in the private sphere, that’s why individual experience is equal to collective ones. East also notes:

This concept understands that “our feelings about ourselves … are shaped by political forces … controlled by others. To change that situation, we must impose ourselves on historical processes and material conditions and, in doing so, expose as false the myths of our powerlessness and dependence” (BrinkerJenkins and Hooyman 1986: 14, quoted in East 1999: 151).

‘The personal is political’ means that a woman’s experience is all women’s experiences in society and their experiences have to do with political influences. Given that women who live in a sexist society are obstructed from seeing and acknowledge male domination and female powerlessness in the sense that they could not be aware of the unequal distribution of power in their society, and they might not have awareness that their experiences are influenced by political forces, and local grassroots women might face the same problem as they also suffer from sexism at work. To enable women to understand this concept, the common method is, the same as the strategy “personal consciousness raising”, by allowing
them to uncover or analyze the impacts of male domination through sharing common experience in the programme (often in groups) so that they understand ‘the personal is the political’ (GlenMaye 1998). With their awareness of the concept “the personal is political” becoming stronger, women would be able to take action to change themselves and the social structures that oppress women (GlenMaye 1998). At the same time, women are also fostered to reject their socially subordinated status and, then, to have more desire for a better social life with more equal opportunities (Jain 1997). So, the effects of this strategy include: (1) enabling women to take action for social change and (2) the creation of increased desire for a more equal social life. Practically, being enabled to take action for changing the social structures represents that women can have political power, whereas the increased desire for a much better social life could be seen as a fundamental source of motivation for taking action to bring social change. Once women can be more motivated, their potential political power – i.e., potential ability to organize and mobilize for changing social systems, could be increased. More specifically, the functions of ‘political consciousness raising’ are the enhancement of women’s actual and potential political power.

It is worth to notice that both personal and political consciousness raising are inseparable in practice (GlenMaye 1998). What this means is that if the strategy ‘personal consciousness raising’ is to be implemented, the aim of ‘political consciousness raising’ would probably be attained as well. As recognized before, the objectives of both the strategies are achieved by the relevant programmes that are often in the format of groups. However, as a result of relying on the groups for implementing these two strategies, even though a certain women’s organization merely intends to use a group to attain the goals of ‘personal consciousness raising’, the political one might come true without being expected. Originally, the purpose of using the group is only to give women chances to express and to identify their own feelings – i.e., the process ‘personal consciousness raising’. But as it is created often by groups, the phenomenon ‘sharing common experience’ would arise – i.e.,
the process ‘political consciousness raising’, simply because expressing one’s own feelings in a group may mean telling one’s own story, which is similar to other women, to the group members. At this stage, they would understand more their own situation in concomitance with realizing that they share a common experience and their feelings are affected by political forces. Hence, what GlenMaye argues that both of them cannot be separated in the reality is to explain that the aim of ‘political consciousness raising’ would likely come true as long as the personal one is to be carried out by means of groups. By the same token, only achieving the objective of ‘political consciousness raising’ by groups would also lead the aim of personal consciousness raising to come true although this is unexpected at all. It is because the original intention of using a group is just to give women chances to share their own feelings, but sharing individual feelings with each other has already involved defining one’s own experience. This undeniably helps women understand not only the concept “the personal is political” but also their own situation. Hence, the implementation of both the strategies entails the potentiality of attaining the objective of either personal or political consciousness raising, especially when they are carried out by the programme in the format of group.

**Leadership training**

In addition to ‘consciousness raising in the political aspect’, the ‘leadership training’ strategy can enable women to have an actual ability to act for changing social systems as well since it supplies women with chances to learn skills pertaining to organizing and mobilizing ones for fostering social change (East 1999; Fung 1994; Lazo 1995). Similarly, the skills that local grassroots women lack include those for social change apart from those for employment due to their low education level. This strategy aims at offering chances to women to learn related skills in the leadership training programmes. The women’s organizations studied by Lazo (1995) and East (1999) have taken leadership training as the
empowerment strategies and used different related programmes to put it into effect. As shown in a case study by Lazo (1995), the Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a project for leadership training by which women use data gathered during the research for deciding how to approach, assemble and mobilize the women home workers in the community. This programme has achieved a good result since women had learned skills as to “how to organize, how to make proposals, how to conduct participatory action research, how to network, how to lobby and advocate, how to manage micro-enterprises and the like”, and it had also enabled the women to train other women at the grassroots level (Lazo 1995: 32). Another example is the leadership training retreats which involved 4-5 women who are volunteers to be the planning team. This programme has given chances to women to absorb organizing skills by facilitating meetings, developing workshops and fundraising (East 1999). So, the main point here is that the leadership training strategy, which can be implemented by various training programmes, provides women with chances to learn skills for social change so that they are enabled to absorb such skills and their actual ability to organize and mobilize for social change can be enhanced.

2.3. Evaluative Criteria for Women’s Empowerment Strategies

Evaluative criteria for specific empowerment strategies

Although there are various types of evaluation of empowerment’s strategies, the outcome evaluation tends to be a more suitable type for assessing the effectiveness of strategies for empowerment since it “addresses the intended goals of the program. […] determine[s] to what extent an intervention has realized its goals and objectives” (Parsons 1998: 206). Why it is appropriate is that determining to what extent an intervention has reached its objectives is exactly equal to assessing the effectiveness of an intervention. It is because ‘the effectiveness of an intervention’ refers to the degree to which an intervention is capable of producing the result that was expected. More clearly, if an empowerment strategy
is evaluated to reach its objectives to a larger extent, it represents that the strategy is judged to be more effective, and vice versa. Thus, although the evaluated subjects, ‘program’ and ‘intervention’ as suggested by Parsons, are different from ‘strategy’, the purpose of using outcome evaluation is instead suitable because this project aims to evaluate to what extent the empowerment strategies of WWA can realize their objectives. The issue about how to evaluate the effectiveness therefore arises. Gutierrez (1998) suggests that there are generally three dimensions that could be used to develop assessment tools. In the personal dimension of empowerment, the measure outcomes encompass such constructs as self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-acceptance, etc. As for interpersonal empowerment, the constructs include asking for help, problem solving and practicing new skills. And for political dimension of empowerment, the measures encompass political participation, giving back, making contribution and taking action. All of these constructs are the expected outcomes of strategies in each dimension of empowerment (Parsons 1998), which also means that the expected outcomes can be used as assessment tools – i.e., measures or criteria and hence helps provide a guideline for this study to develop evaluative criteria. However, as shown in this chapter, there are different specific strategies for each level of women’s empowerment, the expected outcomes of these particular strategies would be rather different and this also determines different contents of the criteria even though the premise of developing the criteria – i.e., those that can achieve more of the expected outcomes are judged to be the strategies with greater effectiveness. Here both the objectives (expected outcomes) and the criteria are listed in Table 3 and Table 4 for clearer illustration.
### Table 3: Objectives of specific empowerment strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for women’s empowerment</th>
<th>Objectives (Expected Outcomes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal consciousness raising</strong></td>
<td>To encourage women to define their own experiences in their language in the consciousness-raising programmes so that they understand their own situation and their intrinsic personal power can thus be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skill training</strong></td>
<td>To provide women with chances to learn skills favorable for work in the training programmes so that their actual personal power (skills) and intrinsic personal power (self-esteem and self-efficacy) can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectivization</strong></td>
<td>To promote women to learn interpersonal skills, including mutual aid and problem-tackling skills, in the relevant programme so that their collective awareness and interpersonal power can thus be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political consciousness raising</strong></td>
<td>To encourage women to analyze the impacts of male domination during sharing common experience in the consciousness-raising programmes so that they understand ‘the personal is political’ and their actual and potential political power can thus be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership training</strong></td>
<td>To provide women with chances to learn skills for social change, including organizing and mobilizing skills in the training programmes so that their actual political power can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Evaluative criteria for the effectiveness of the empowerment strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for women’s empowerment</th>
<th>Evaluative criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal consciousness raising</td>
<td>✓ Under this strategy, women can be encouraged to define their own experiences in their language in the consciousness-raising programmes. ✓ Women’s understanding about their needs, feelings and experiences as well as their self-esteem and self-efficacy can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill training</td>
<td>✓ Under this strategy, women can be given chances to learn skills in the training programmes. ✓ Women’s actual personal power (skills) and psychological (self-efficacy) personal power can be strengthened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivization</td>
<td>✓ Under this strategy, women can be engaged in the process of understanding the functions of collectivity in the relevant programme. ✓ Women’s interpersonal power can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political consciousness raising</td>
<td>✓ Under this strategy, women can be encouraged to analyze the impacts of male domination during sharing their common experience in the consciousness-raising programmes. ✓ Women’s understanding about the concept “the individual is political” and their actual and potential political power could be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership training</td>
<td>✓ Under this strategy, women can be provided with chances to learn skills for social change in the training programmes. ✓ Women’s actual political power can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have illustrated a number of definitions related to empowerment and all of these helped come up with an integrated definition of women’s empowerment. A series of strategies for women’s empowerment and a set of evaluative criteria for the effectiveness of specific strategies have also been reviewed and developed. The criteria listed in Table 4
are actually the universal expected outcomes of particular strategies. A certain strategy could be considered to have higher effectiveness if it can attain more of the universal expected outcomes. In other words, the more evaluative criteria a strategy can meet, the more effective it is judged to be. How we can know how many the universal expected outcomes a certain strategy taken by a women’s group could achieve is through finding out its actual outcomes. If the difference between expected outcomes and actual outcomes is smaller, a certain strategy can be judged to be more effective. It is simply because its actual outcomes reflect how many criteria it could meet and thus provides the information about the extent to which it could achieve the expected outcomes or its effectiveness. And I have applied such qualitative research methods as historiography and in-depth interviews to find out the actual outcomes of the WWA’s empowerment strategies in addition to studying what the empowerment strategies are adopted by the Association. In the subsequent chapter, the methods of data collection for this project will be further elaborated.
CHAPTER THREE  METHODOLOGY

3.1. Reasons for Applying Qualitative Research Methods

This research project was conducted by qualitative research methods. As far as the significance of this project is concerned, it was hoped that in conducting the research we can learn more about the process in which local women’s organizations improve the livelihoods of grassroots women through implementing a series of empowering measures. To have such significance in this aspect, applying qualitative methods for conducting this project is a suitable way. Given that this project involves the study of strategy effectiveness – i.e., evaluation, so we may learn more about, or say, have a greater depth of understanding about the process in which women’s groups improve grassroots women’s life by means of empowerment strategies if qualitative methods are used to conduct evaluation because:

Qualitative research designs provide an excellent starting point for understanding and defining empowerment; that is, capturing process and states in specific contexts of diverse populations. […] too much emphasis on quantitative documentation will probably distort one’s understanding of important processes (Parsons 1998: 210).

The project also involves the study of what the empowerment strategies women’s groups adopt – i.e., how the women’s groups empower grassroots women. Indeed, ‘how to empower’ already touches on the process of empowerment. Thus, if this study is conducted by qualitative methods, we may learn more about the process in which women’s groups improve grassroots women’s life by empowerment strategies as these methods “provide an excellent starting point for […] capturing process” (Parsons 1998: 210). To make it clear, the qualitative research methods I have applied to conduct this project include the case study method, historiography (also known as historical research), and in-depth interviews.

3.2. Reasons for Choosing the Case Study Method

The fundamental objective of this project is to delve into the empowerment strategies
adopted by local women’s concern groups and their effectiveness. For so doing, the case study method was applied in this research. As said previously, a number of women’s groups have used various ways to empower grassroots women in Hong Kong, choosing the case study method is thus suitable for delving into their empowerment strategies mainly on the ground that this method can have scientific value or significance – i.e., studying one of these women’s groups as a case is to a certain degree generalizable. According to Berg (2004: 259), “there is clearly a scientific value to gain from investigating some single category of individual, group, or event simply to gain an understanding of that individual, group, or event. For those with a more positivist orientation who have concern about generalizing to similar types of individuals, groups, or events, case methods are still useful and to some extent generalizable”. This has pointed out why the case study method was applied to this project. What’s more, one of the reasons for choosing WWA as a case study is that although there are many other women’s groups which are concerned with grassroots women in Hong Kong, their beneficiaries are not confined to these women but do include those with different backgrounds. The other way round, the subjects served by the Association are all grassroots women who participate in physical labour that includes both paid and unpaid work (WWA 2006). Hence, it is more suitable to be my case for study.

3.3. Reasons for Applying Historiography and In-depth Interviews

Because of choosing the case study method and taking WWA as a case study in the sense that this project tried to fulfill the fundamental objective by aiming to delve into the empowerment strategies adopted by WWA and their effectiveness, this research therefore aims at studying the questions listed below: (1) what are the strategies adopted by WWA for empowering grassroots women? and (2) how effective are these empowerment strategies? I applied historiography and in-depth interviews to provide answers for these questions. Indeed, there are several reasons for me to choose both of the methods for data gathering. Since
CHAPTER THREE   METHODOLOGY

WWA regularly publishes working reports every year and sets up an official website through which I can obtain and analyze information provided, this helps me find out not simply what have been done in the past but also what the empowerment strategies have already been implemented and even how effective they are. Nonetheless, only applying historiography is not adequate to deal with my research questions due to the concern about “internal validity of documents” (Berg 2004: 242) in the sense that the analysis of the data acquired from both the working reports and official website is merely based on my own interpretation, but whether the meaning of the data may not be interpreted accurately. At the same time, the information given by these sources of data tends to be summary-oriented and so cannot help me study my research questions in a deeper level. To redeem these deficiencies, the method of in-depth interviews was hence applied as well. It is because both the working reports and official website are written by the leaders or members of WWA, their responses can make sure if my own interpretation of data from both sources is correct or not. They can also be invited to elaborate on any relevant areas that are not discussed deeply in the reports or on the website. On top of this consideration, only relying on in-depth interviews without historical research is not enough as well. Given that it is essential to devise questions before conducting every interview, if the interview questions are constructed only on the basis of the research framework there would likely be no any responses provided by interviewees simply because they are unclear about the meaning of my questions which entail some difficult academic concepts. Meanwhile, doing historical research can provide a basic and preliminary knowledge about the Association so that I can construct the interview questions that are easier for the interviewees to understand, while it is also the way for me to show my respect and sincerity to learn about their empowerment strategies.

To make it more concrete, the sources of data for doing historiography mainly came from the annual reports published by the WWA and its own website. I conducted 12 interviews with 2 organizers and 10 participants. The 2 organizers refer to those who are
responsible for implementing the empowerment strategies (e.g., designing strategies, holding programmes, activities or workshops for putting such strategies into practice, and the like). The 10 participants are grassroots women who have participated in certain empowerment programmes. The interviewees’ background information has been listed in Table 5 and 6 as follows.

**Table 5: Profile of interviewees – WWA’s organizers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Post in WWA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wai San</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ka Ying</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The names listed in Table 1 are pseudonyms.

**Table 6: Profile of interviewees – WWA’s participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name**</th>
<th>Marriage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Current occupation</th>
<th>No. of child(ren)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mei Yin</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Part-time worker in Jockey Club and salesperson in Cooperatives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lai Fong</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>WWA’s committee and salesperson in Cooperatives</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shui Man</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Salesperson in Cooperatives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pui Kuen</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Salesperson in Cooperatives</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoi Yi</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Salesperson in Cooperatives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wing Mui</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Member of Cooperative and domestic helper</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chui Ping</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Cleaner in HKWWA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fung Lin</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Member of Cooperative</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oi Lan</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Domestic helper</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan Ting</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>School janitor</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The names listed in Table 2 are pseudonyms.**

Six interviews were conducted in the Students’ Union Office of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the remaining six cases were interviewed in the conference room of WWA. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese and the original data gathered from interviews were transcribed into English for analysis. Two sets of interview guides were prepared for interviewing organizers and participants respectively. In the interview guides, the questions are related to such issues as the empowerment strategies adopted by WWA, the
objectives of programmes run by the Association, the activities in these programmes, and the benefits women participants gained from them. The time for completing each of interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes.
CHAPTER FOUR
HONG KONG WOMEN WORKERS’ ASSOCIATION
AND ITS EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES

In this chapter, I will firstly provide a brief introduction to WWA and then analyze the data collected by means of historiography and in-depth interviews so as to study my research questions.

4.1. Brief Introduction to WWA

Since 1989, WWA was founded under the trend of popularization of the women’s movement in Hong Kong. Its membership consists of “a combination of female workers, social workers, and labour organizers” (Tsang 1995: 281). The major factors stimulating these people to form WWA have more to do with the employment plights that include marginalization and exploitation of women workers, owing to the relocation of manufacturing industries in Hong Kong from the 1980s onwards (Tsang 1995). Being one of the women’s concern groups locally, the objectives of the Association are to unite and organize women workers at the grassroots level to fight for their rights as workers and as women; and to empower them to deal with their needs and problems through launching learning programmes to equip and develop them (Association for Women’s Rights in Development 2006; Tsang 1995). Its work puts focuses on such areas as building up networks of women workers, organizing their strength for employment security, improving their quality of life through collective actions, giving suggestions to some social policies and fighting for amendment of laws that bring inequality to women (WWA 1999). As its counterparts like HKAAF and the Women’s Centre, WWA makes lots of endeavor to enhance the power of grassroots women by assorted methods. In the next section, I will analyze the information gathered through historiography and in-depth interviews.
4.2. Empowerment Programmes of WWA

On the basis of the research framework of this project, I have already applied the method of historiography and in-depth interviews for studying the empowerment strategies adopted by WWA. Given that the empowerment strategies reviewed in the research framework are commonly adopted by various women’s concern groups and scholars in different places, it is most possible that my case study also adopts them for enhancing the power of local grassroots women and thus the first thing I did was to find out which of these strategies are taken by my case study. As the contents of all the strategies reviewed entails the relevant empowerment programmes (e.g., the content of the strategy ‘skill training’ involves the skill training programme), it is necessary for a women’s group to launch the relevant programme firstly if it intends to implement a certain empowerment strategy. So, even though both annual reports and official website could only provide the information about what programmes were launched in the previous years without showing whether they were set up in line with particular empowerment strategies, it is still likely that they are the related programmes of these particular strategies. The way for me to know what relevant programmes the empowerment projects launched by WWA is to compare the objectives of these projects with those of the strategies listed in Chapter Two. It is because being a relevant programme launched to achieve the aims of an empowerment strategy, its objectives must be the same as those of a particular strategy. When I discovered that the goals of a project are similar to those of a certain strategy, I could judge the project is a corresponding programme of that strategy and WWA has adopted this strategy for empowering women as a result. It was found that the objectives of many WWA’s programmes are similar to or even the same as the aims of certain empowerment strategies reviewed in Chapter Two. And the responses given by interviewees further ascertained the objectives of the empowerment programmes studied through historical research so that I could have more confidence in determining which of the strategies reviewed are taken by WWA. In other words, most of the empowerment strategies
reviewed are taken by my case study. The strategies reflected from each of the WWA’s programmes could be classified into the following levels:

**Personal and political empowerment**

At the levels of personal and political empowerment, WWA has adopted both ‘personal consciousness raising’ and ‘political consciousness raising’, and implemented them simultaneously by launching one programme. One of the WWA's projects, “Bauhinia Group – Middle-aged Single Women Development Scheme” (*WWA 2002*), is a personal consciousness-raising programme because when women join the Bauhinia Group or, alternatively, the Development Scheme they would be encouraged to participate in such activities as self-examination about the identity as well as tangible and intangible social pressures of middle-aged single women from different perspectives of livelihoods like their stories of self-growth, their self-image and sexual issues (e.g., marriage and love) (*WWA 2006*). Women who are engaged in Bauhinia could obtain chances to express their feeling as a single middle-aged woman through sharing sections organized by that group. Interestingly, this scheme is a political consciousness-raising programme at the same time since women may even discuss some issues about social pressure and discrimination against those with the same background as them within the sharing sections. What’s more, the participants of Bauhinia could meet the legislative councilors to voice out their grievance about the indifference of the government to the demands of single middle-aged women. They also plan to take actions to give the government suggestions upon collection of information related to the housing problems of those women (*WWA 2002*). As the Bauhinia Group is a means to achieve the objectives of both personal and political consciousness raising, the Association not only adopts these two empowerment strategies but also implements them simultaneously by holding one scheme. In the process of having conversations with some of the organizers and women participants, it was understood that the Bauhinia Group has no longer been held
since 2003 and the organizer who was responsible for this programme and kept the contact list for participants had already quitted from WWA. In this regard, it is impossible to ascertain if the Bauhinia Group is a relevant programme of the strategies ‘personal consciousness raising’ and ‘political consciousness raising’ through interviewing the related staff members who were responsible for the scheme before. In other words, I can only rely on the information provided by the annual reports and official website of WWA to determine which the relevant programme of the empowerment strategy does the Women Development Scheme belong to.

**Personal empowerment**

For empowering women’s actual personal power, WWA has taken ‘skill training’ as a strategy and tried to put it into practice by launching several related programmes like “Computer Course”, “Domestic Helper Advanced Course” and “Haircut Skills Basic Training”, all of which are provided by the WWA-affiliated Women’s Mutual-aid Resource Centre (WMRC) (WWA 2003). The WMRC as part of the Association can be seen as a combination of the small-scale university’s computing centre and library because “[i]t is equipped with computer facilities, video corner and library for books and magazines (WWA 2000). The design of the Computer Course requires women members to study and practise some basic computer knowledge, which mainly includes Chinese typing and how to search information through the Internet. The Association allows women members to practise computer skills in WMRC since some of them do not have computers in the family. As long as they are familiar with the use of computer, members can join the volunteers’ team to give a hand to other women who need to find their jobs on the Internet (WWA 2003). Moreover, it is not uncommon that grassroots women, especially those who are middle-aged, work as a part-time domestic helper (refer to Table 7).


Table 7: Expected training quota, number of graduates and employment, employment rate and training cost for domestic helper retrainees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000/01</th>
<th>2001/02</th>
<th>2002/03</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected number retrainees</td>
<td>10 000</td>
<td>12 000</td>
<td>17 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of graduates</td>
<td>9 294</td>
<td>11 625</td>
<td>15 775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of employment</td>
<td>7 397</td>
<td>9 550</td>
<td>9 221*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment rate</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>58%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average training cost per retrainee</td>
<td>$3268</td>
<td>$3343</td>
<td>$3251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average subsidy per retrainee</td>
<td>$1845.6</td>
<td>$1845.6</td>
<td>$1589</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hong Kong SAR Government Information Centre 2003; original data from Employees Retraining Board 2003.

Note: * Up to the end of November 2002.

Although there is a lack of information about the exact number of grassroots women who are domestic helpers, the data listed in Table 6 can to a certain extent show that there are more and more domestic helper retrainees who graduated from the courses organized by the Employees Retraining Board and are employed in the labour market. More importantly, women always comprise the larger percentage of retrainee population (see also Table 8). So, the data above might indicate that the trend of grassroots women working as domestic helpers becomes increasingly common today.

Table 8: Retrainee Profile - By Sex

Source: Employees Retraining Board 2007.

* Remark: Financial Year 2006-07 figures are as at July 2006.
For the sake of strengthening their related skills, the Domestic Helper Advanced Course is therefore provided for grassroots women. When they join the Course, women would obtain chances to meet some qualified domestic laborers who are invited to share their working experiences. During the training process, WMRC also assigns tutors to the Course for giving comments and demonstrations to women members so as to enhance the confidence of the members (WWA 2003). Those who take part in the Haircut Skills Basic Training could have opportunities to learn some haircutting skills and to apply them to everyday life, community service and even community economic development. At the same time, this Basic Training tries to increase members’ self-confidence as well as to broaden the space of women members’ community participation and development. As a result of its emphasis on application of skills, women are rendered with the chances of internship upon which they may go to elderly centers to offer a free hair cutting service to older people. Members can hereby practise the skills they have learned and realize the significance of service provision (WWA 2003). Again, as the Computer Course, Domestic Helper Advanced Course and Haircut Skills Basic Training are also the programmes which have no longer been held by WWA and the staff members who are in charge of such programmes have already left, it is unavailable to directly confirm their objectives so as to see if they are the related programmes of ‘skill training’ through interviewing the responsible organizers. Under this circumstance, I could only make use of the information given by the annual reports and official website of WWA to determine which the relevant programme of the empowerment strategy do the abovementioned training courses belong to.

**Personal and interpersonal empowerment**

From the last section, it was indicated that WWA adopts ‘skill training’ for empowering grassroots women at the personal level and tries to implement this strategy by some training courses. Nevertheless, the objectives of the “Cooperative (Co-op in short form) Programme”
(WWA 2006) not merely prove again that the Association takes ‘skill training’ as the empowerment strategy but also reveal that it tries to carry out this strategy together with ‘collectivization’ by one programme. Over the past several years, WWA has set up a number of cooperative programmes, namely “Women Workers’ Printing Co-op”, “Women’s Bottle Recycling Co-op”, and “Typing Co-op”. It is as late as in 2001 that the “Women Workers’ Concentric Co-op” was established in the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) (WWA 2006). Among these cooperatives, the Women Workers’ Printing Co-op can be regarded as a pioneer since it is the first one founded in 1997. The serious unemployment problem of grassroots women and the governmental indifference to that problem are the major stimuli for the Association to found the Printing Co-op, which has been considered another type of economic activity seeking to relieve the financial pressures caused by unemployment and to enable women workers to learn self-determination (WWA 1999). In spite of these reasons, its objectives are not confined to build up a collective economic career and to enhance women’s independent economic power but it does also include the goal of developing an equal and mutual-aid interpersonal working relationship. In order to reach these objectives, the Co-op has set a series of short-term and long-terms goals among which having the good command of running co-op’s businesses and establishing self-efficacy are not an exception (WWA 1999). Women in the Co-op are also given opportunities to learn different skills favorable for work, such as printing machine operation, business management, and so forth. So, promoting women to do business operation actually means enabling them to learn it. On the other hand, the term “cooperative” refers to a group, society or club in which women are encouraged to give support to one another and to learn how to deal with difficulties or problems under the principles of equality and mutual aid. Indeed, it was as early as in 1998 that the emphasis of this programme has been put on strengthening mutual support and cooperation among women members (WWA 1999). More surprisingly, when studying it further, it was realized that the ‘cooperative’ entails the meaning of ‘enterprise’ since women in the Co-op are
fostered to work together to manage daily operation and create income by doing economic activities. In any event, irrespective of whether it is profit-oriented or not, the Co-op can be seen as a mutual-support group which gives women a great deal of chances to learn interpersonal skills through the process of cooperation so as to favor them to develop an interpersonal working relationship with their peers, while women can also be enabled to have stronger collective awareness by experiencing the process of absorbing mutual-support and problem-solving skills (WWA 1999). Since the Cooperative Programme was the common means instrumented to carry out both ‘skill training’ and ‘collectivization’, it could be argued that the Association implements these two strategies simultaneously by setting up one programme. Originally, my interviewees included the staff members who were in charge of all the Cooperative Programmes, but the Printing Co-op as one of these programmes has been cancelled a few years ago. Under this condition, the responsible organizers are unavailable to be interviewed. So, similar to the case of the Bauhinia Group, the only way for me is to rely on the data provided by WWA’s documents in order to study this Co-op.

The establishment of the Women Workers’ Concentric Co-op in CUHK, on the other hand, can be deemed as the symbol which represents the fact that the concern about the situation of grassroots women has successfully been cultivated in the campus, and its foundation is also the fruit of efforts made by supporters of the Association, women workers and university students (WWA 2002). Indeed, this Co-op programme was proposed by the students from CUHK rather than by WWA. One of the reasons why the students came up with this idea is that they did not agree with someone who suggested making use of a vacant shop located in the CUHK campus to open a convenient store as doing so is equal to fostering the process of big companies’ monopolization. Another reason has to do with the fact that the university is a good place for women’s development. As recalled by Wai San, a secretary of WWA, “the university is an advantageous location in which women can get in touch with students as well as face the society, so the shop was given to some groups to run”.
She further showed that the cooperative formed by the grassroots were less prevailing than the agricultural ones at the time of founding the Concentric Co-op. Yet, what Wai San mentioned is not very true since the Concentric Co-op was founded in 2001 but the agricultural co-op had already faded since the late 1980s, so it is unlikely that the grassroots cooperative were less common than the agricultural ones at that moment.

Rather, it is the reality that the concept of the Concentric Co-op to some extent originated from the agricultural, or more exactly, the fishery and agricultural cooperative that was widely established with the “Cooperative Movement” promoted by the government since 1951 and the number of this kind of co-op had reached 387 between 1952 and 1965 (Hsia 2006: 169). Indeed, why the government launched the Cooperative Movement was for political ends which included enhancing the productivity of fish and vegetables to relieve the food pressure imposed by a huge inflow of population with the change of the Mainland China’s regime in 1949 and minimizing the dissatisfaction of Chinese migrants, who lacked community kinship support and encountered living difficulties, with the colonial government (Chiu and Hung 1997). In 1964, there was the establishment of the first non-governmental cooperative, namely “Saving Mutual-Help Society”, and this kind of co-op were distributed in the civil servants, churches and private institutions rather than in fishery and agricultural units (Hsia 2006: 170). The purpose of the Society was to encourage saving, render loan service to any member in need, and support continuous education and social services. In the 1970s, there were another type of cooperative formed by the civil society that included trade unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), while their aims include helping workers resolve their income problems (Hsia 2006). However, all the above cooperatives had been increasingly losing their importance and influences in the late 1980s. It was as late as in the 1990s, the issues related to civil cooperative started to revive and more and more NGOs decided to organize cooperative, while the Women’s Printing Co-op is an experiment for WWA to hold cooperative (Hsia 2006). Hence, it can roughly be said that the Concentric
Co-op run by WWA has its own origin traced back to the 1950s. Regardless of whether they were formed by the government or by the civil society, these co-ops could be seen to have economic or profit-oriented features.

Although helping women workers solve the employment problems is the background for WWA to hold the Cooperative Programme, it is still not the pure reason behind the foundation of the Concentric Co-op. As explained by Wai San:

Because the positions provided by the co-op are limited and it can only help around ten women at most to be employed. And women just work on part-time mode, so the co-op cannot help them earn a living very much [...] we rather hope that by this co-op programme can women grow and realize there are some areas they have says.

Actually, what she talked about has involved a little bit the objectives of the Concentric Co-op, that is, to develop women and to awaken them to the fact that they have the right of decision-making. In order to do so, the Association intends to make use of the Co-op to encourage women to involve in such democratic activities as price setting, determining how the Co-op should be developed and how they cooperate with students, and even knowing that they could have says in universal suffrage. Wai San also illustrates a phenomenon that “[f]or women who worked at factories previously, their life experiences were that they did what their bosses wanted them to do. Or for women who have never worked before, they always listened to their husbands”. In other words, instead of allowing women to grow and realize they have says, the absence of women’s right of decision-making is one of the reasons for WWA to form the Co-op.

It is interesting that the Concentric Co-op provides women members with chances to participate in both external and internal activities. Externally, women are engaged in a series of social actions like demonstration for universal suffrage, actions for fighting against domestic violence and even the anti-WTO action in the previous year through which women used the perspective of grassroots women to examine what are the influences of WTO on them. Why WWA uses the Co-op to encourage women to take part in such external activities is related to the fact that the cooperative “entails a great social significance” (Wai San). With
respect to internal activities, since the Co-op consists of both convenient store and photocopying businesses, so the meaning of internal activities refers to doing business operation inside these two businesses. At the first stage of the Concentric Co-op, the major business is the provision of photocopying service. As revealed by Wai San, in the photocopying service acquiring the related skills is essential for getting the business done, so there are some training workshops provided for members to absorb photocopying skills in the Co-op. The location for photocopying is at the Student Union of CUHK and the service is mainly rendered for university students. In the winter of 2001, the Women Workers Cooperative Store was opened in CUHK and members’ main duties are to sell cooked food and refreshments, and to render newspaper subscription service (WWA 2006). It should be noticed that in the language of WWA’s organizers, assuming the task of commercial operation contains the meaning of learning it (see WWA 2006). More specifically, members in the convenient store mainly have the tasks of cooking food, preparing snacks and drinks, purchasing products and doing transactions. Most of these are deemed as a learning activity. Wai San expressed that learning work skills is not the major activity as the members have already attained the “master-class level” in some skills like cooking in particular. Undoubtedly, most of the members were full-time housewives before, so it is unnecessary for them to learn cooking skills at all. Wai San also implied that the Co-op has the aims of enabling women to enhance their work skills as well as self-esteem and self-efficacy, but what work skills she referred to are such commercial skills as business operation, goods ordering and wage calculation other than cooking. In other words, what she meant is that the objectives of the Co-op include encouraging women to learn work skills pertinent to business operation but not those related to food preparation.

Members inside the convenient store and photocopying businesses are meanwhile given opportunities to learn mutual-aid and problem-solving skills when they are working in the Co-op. Wai San stressed that the focus of the Concentric Co-op is put on cooperation as it is a
place emphasizing mutual collaboration by which members’ collectivity can be enhanced. She further explained:

As more than ten women are bosses [in the programme], democracy is an exhausting process […] but making a decision needs to be passed and agreed by more than ten people. Since their age is similar and there is no any hierarchy, the efficiency of management is relatively low […] as there is no management and power structure, mutual cooperation and tolerance are focused.

Hence, the operation principles are the same as those of the Printing Co-op, which include creating incomes by collective cooperation, mutual assumption of responsibilities and decision making, equal sharing and allocation of duties, and the like. Encouraging the co-op members to learn cooperation is the outcome expected by the Concentric Co-op as well (WWA 2003; WWA 2006). It is worth to notice that cooperation involves the sense of mutual-aid and doing cooperation or division of labour also has the sense of learning cooperation. So, in the official language, giving chances to make collaboration or to do mutual aid is equal to the meaning of giving chances to learn them (see also WWA 2003).

Similar to the Printing Co-op and the Concentric Co-op, the Women Bottle Recycling Co-op is also a mutual-aid group in nature. Its founding background is that WWA used to concentrate its focus on women workers’ rights and policy issues but later discovered that the community work would easily be ignored if only concerning such big issues. Wai San further noted that the work related to policies and community work are interrelated because carrying out the former work needs to mobilize neighbors and members to take part in and the latter one can help build up a good foundation, that is, more people’s participation. The staff members firstly came up with the topic of environmental protection to enter the community of Kwun Tong in which WWA is established. One of its goals is to create chances of “green employment” (Wai San) by giving women wages and to let women acquire the Co-op’s experience – i.e., making decisions by their own and even to approach more neighbors who live in Kwun Tong district through bringing in some issues relevant to environmental protection. Or more simply, WWA makes use of this Recycling Co-op to foster women’s
employment, associated with reducing the amount of rubbish disposed. On top of this aim, it tries to use this Co-op to draw more government’s attention to its significance and the necessity of environmental protection on the ground that this programme is mainly funded by the Environmental Protection Department. Wai San supplemented that the effectiveness of ‘green employment’ through this kind of Co-op is not high enough due to the lack of the related policies. Indeed, according to a survey by Greenpeace (2000), the rubbish recycling system managed by the government is not good to the extent that a great deal of opportunities of local environmental-protection employment has therefore lost.

The Recycling Co-op has the objectives of taking mutual-support cooperation as a format to run the recycling center in which women’s personal potentials and self-confidence can be maximized through involving decision-making, public relations, learning operation skills, and so on (WWA 2006). Certainly, encouraging women to cooperate and support mutually so as to enhance their collective awareness is also emphasized. As explained by Wai San, why it has such aims has to do with the fact that “the Co-op demands fairness and equality and there is no difference between members, so decision making relies on cooperation, mutual tolerance and accommodation”. However, it was realized that it does not have the aim of enhancing women’s work skills since doing rubbish classification and recycling does not need too many skills (Wai San). Besides, women in the Co-op actually take part in such recycling tasks as preparing recycling materials, setting up recycling stations, visiting the district to do recycling, promoting this programme to the neighbors, and so on. As long as coming back to the Association, they would do some tidy-up work like weighing and classifying rubbish and then wait someone to collect them. Members are also provided with chances to absorb some recycling knowledge like the differences between the plastic of water bottles and that of instant noodles packages. Moreover, women and Wai San, as a staff member, hold a meeting every two weeks in order to decide the content of the programme and even to resolve wrangles among the members. In the Co-op, there is also a
learning group in which women may concern some social affairs outside the field of environmental protection, including minimum wage, CSSA, etc., so as to let them take note of other people and issues. And Wai San emphasized that these activities certainly contain the elements of learning mutual-aid and problem-tackling skills as there are more than ten members working together and there must be problems involving the relationship between them. To make it clearer, the Recycling Co-op is somehow different from the other two Co-op Programmes since learning work skills is not included by it. Yet, given that encouraging women to learn mutual-aid and problem-solving skills in order that their collectivity can be enhances is one of the Co-op’s objectives, it can still be confirmed that this Co-op is the corresponding programme of ‘collectivization’.

**Political empowerment**

The strategy ‘leadership training’ has been adopted by WWA for increasing the political power of grassroots women. In order to carry out this strategy, the WWA-affiliated Trade Union for Cleaners launches a training course as the leadership training programme. Regarding this Trade Union for Cleaners, there are both organizers and a committee formed by women workers in the Union as part of WWA. Currently, the committee has altogether seven committee members whose occupation must be cleaning workers and elected by the union members themselves on the one-person-one-vote mechanism (Ka Ying). Owing to the fact that the management of public housing estates has further been privatized and the management contracts has also been given out to private companies by the Housing Authority, while the private companies have the right to employ cleaning companies. With this “One-stream System” (*WWA 2003*), the wages and workload of cleaning workers are exploited more seriously. As clarified by the Association (*WWA 2001*), “[m]ost of the cleaners are either middle-aged woman with new immigrant’s background, or elderly who have low bargaining power. They are extremely vulnerable to exploitation by the private-run,
profit-oriented cleaning companies. Thus concern and assistance from the outside is much needed for mobilization and organization”. It is in this background the Union was established in 2002 and its major tasks are to provide help for contract-out cleaners in public housing estates to cope with labour issues, to voice the demand of ameliorating workers’ protection by setting up the minimum wage and strictly monitoring contract-out companies to the government, and to organize activities in order to recruit new members (WWA 2003). In line with these tasks, the Trade Union provides some training courses for the executive committees to enroll so as to strengthen their individual abilities. According to Ka Ying who is another secretary of WWA, because of the fact that the committee members and women volunteers are just common workers and housewives per se, they might not be familiar with the Labour Law and some organizing skills for social actions very much as a result of low education level. For women volunteers, as they are mostly full-time housewives and worked as factory workers at the past but have never worked as cleaners, they lack understanding about the working conditions of cleaners. Therefore, the training course that encompasses such activities as the workshop, the preparation conference for social actions and district visits is set up by the Trade Union. This training course has two objectives: the first one is to strengthen the committee members’ ability of organizing social actions and enable them to master the Labour Law and some social issues like the minimum pay and security for worker retirement; the second one is to organize women volunteers living in the Kwun Tong district to pay visits to cleaners in order to build up mutual-support relationship and enhance the volunteers’ understanding about the situation of cleaners. Indeed, the executive committees themselves are also women workers, so the purpose of training the committees is to enable them to set a good model for other cleaners and be more persuasive. In September 2002, for instance, the Union made connection with cleaners to hand in a report on “Working Condition of Contract-out Cleaners under One-stream System” to the Housing Panel of the Legislative Council. They have sent the complaint about the misbehavior of cleaning
companies and demanded councilors to follow up the complaints (WWA 2003: 13). This example has somewhat indicated that the training courses arranged by the Trade Union try to equip the committees with organizing and mobilizing skills with which they can have the know-how to convince other women cleaners to connect with them and to take actions fighting for their needs. In addition to equipping committees, the Union attempts to organize both women workers and university students to be community volunteers. Up to 2002, the numbers of women and student volunteers were 11 and 9 people respectively (WWA 2003).

Prior to the launching of social actions that mainly refer to district visits, there are workshop and preparation conference held several times usually. In the workshop, both committee members and women volunteers are given chances to learn something related to the Labour Law, which includes the Employment Ordinance, how to take annual holidays and what procedures for taking severance pay are, skills for district visits like how to get in touch with cleaners, what questions should be asked, how to make responses to the statement of cleaners, how to collect some useful things like the problems faced by cleaners to the Trade Union, and so on. Sometimes, cleaners who work in public estates, shopping malls and on the streets are invited to the workshop sharing their working conditions of cleaners in order to let participants realize more the situation of the cleaners. In the preparation conference which is especially arranged for the committee members, the organizers discuss with the members what the aims of the actions are, how they should coordinate themselves when some mass media visit, and some details about division of labour that includes who should explain their actions to neighbors, who should deal with the police, etc. (Ka Ying). So, even though committee members tend to learn more things then do women volunteers in the training course, what they learn is still the same thing – i.e., organizing skills for social actions. The training programme puts an emphasis on “participatory learning” (Ka Ying) in the sense that organizers firstly tell some background information about social actions to participants and then every two participants form a group to pay visits to cleaners, while they
hold meetings again to discuss some problems brought by committee members and women volunteers from district visits after social actions. This mode of learning undeniably gives chances to participants, particularly those who are volunteers, to learn the situation of cleaners more deeply. Besides learning cleaners’ conditions in the process of involving in district visits, the ‘participatory learning’ also means that women participants got chances to learn political skills in the process of managing labour affairs. Hence, it is safe to argue that the training course of the Trade Union provides women, particularly the committee members, with chances to learn political skills through not only the workshop and preparation conference for social actions but also labour affairs management as the routine task of the members.

Upon completion of the courses, participants could pay visits to women cleaners who lodge complaints about the unscrupulous employers disregarding cleaners’ employment benefits. As reported by WWA (2002:11), “when the contract between a cleaning company and the Housing Authority is going to expire, the company relocates women cleaners to working places which are far away from their home in order to compel them to quit”. In this respect, there were 110 volunteers, including grassroots women, who have already visited 400 janitor workers and 22 public estates for giving assistance to deal with such issues as wage cut, unpaid holiday payment, severance payment, occupational safety, etc. On top of explaining the law to these women cleaners, the volunteers organized them to appeal to legal system and negotiate with cleaning companies in order to fight for their own rights (WWA 2002). This implies that the Union’s training course is designed to give chances of learning the political skills in order to let participants obtain stronger organizing and mobilizing abilities so that they can render support for other women in need.

In the following chapter, I am going to evaluate the effectiveness of the WWA’s empowerment strategies through analyzing the data pertinent to women’s experiences in the programmes discussed above.
CHAPTER FIVE

WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES IN THE EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES
OF HONG KONG WOMEN WORKERS’ ASSOCIATION

In this chapter, I analyze the information related to women’s experiences in the empowerment programmes held by WWA, which were mainly gathered from participants but some of which came from organizers and the Association’s publications, so as to study the effectiveness of the WWA’s empowerment strategies on the basis of the evaluative criteria devised in my research framework.

5.1. Evaluation of the Empowerment Strategies Adopted by WWA

**Personal and political empowerment**

As mentioned before, the Bauhinia Group – Middle-aged Single Women Development Scheme was terminated in 2003 and the organizer who was responsible for this programme and kept the contact list of participants had already quitted from WWA. Hence I can only rely on the information provided by the annual reports and official website to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. In the very beginning, it appears that the Bauhinia could not foster women to involve in the empowering processes as they were quite passive towards the group’s activities and the relationship between members was not close enough. Fortunately, at the later stage the members found that they could acquire chances to share feelings and experiences (WWA 2003). Participants in the scheme were even encouraged to share some social problems commonly faced by women with the same social background and were able to take action to give the government suggestions. In 2001, for instance, the Bauhinia members conducted a survey on the housing needs of single women by interviewing their female members who are single and then shared the results with Ms Chan Yuen Han, the legislative councilor. After that, they tried to gather more data about the housing problems faced by single middle-aged women so as to make suggestions to the government (WWA
This reveals that women could acquire some skills for social change from the process of sharing common experience. In general, both personal and political consciousness raising are pretty effective because under their implementation women were enabled to express their own feeling as well as to share common experience by which they could gain actual political power in the related programme. Due to the limited information given by the annual reports and official website, it is unavailable to judge whether both the empowerment strategies can satisfy the rest of the evaluative criteria, including women’s self-esteem and potential political power being enhanced through the corresponding empowering processes. In this regard, I will not use such criteria to do evaluation. Even so, as long as the remaining criteria are focused – i.e., consciousness-raising projects can encourage women to define their own experiences in their language and to analyze the impacts of male domination during sharing their common experience, the Bauhinia Group has already indicated these two empowerment strategies could meet all of the criteria.

**Personal empowerment**

Although all the skill training courses discussed in the last chapter are no longer launched by WWA, there are still three women participants who were willing to accept my invitation to in-depth interviews so that I could rely on their responses to conduct evaluation. Actually, I have interviewed three women who had involved in the above training courses but only one of them had taken part in all of these courses and the other two had merely participated in the Haircut Skills Basic Training. As responded by Yan Ting who had taken part in the Computer Course in 1999, the WWA’s staff members bore the role as a computer tutor and there were more than ten lessons with 1 to 2 hours or so per lesson. Within these ten lessons, she got chances to learn Changjie Codes (倉頡碼) that were printed on papers by the staff members, try to type Chinese words and understand how to switch on and off the computers. Since this course was held in WMRC which could only have two computers
available but there were over ten women who selected the course, every member could just have limited time and opportunities to use computers. Another reason behind the inadequate opportunities of using computers is that “I spent lots of time learning Changjie Codes and typing my own name, there was no time enough for me to touch computers” (Yan Ting). In fact, like many other grassroots women, Yan Ting might not be familiar with operating this kind of technology not only because she always sacrifices her time for caring the family but also because of lower education and income level, which leads her to have less access to computers. Undoubtedly, there is a social problem of “digital divide” in Hong Kong even though it is not very serious in comparison with other parts of the world. The digital divide refers to a difference in having opportunities of using information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as the Internet to do various activities between individuals, households and places at different socio-economic levels (Women’s Commission 2002). Previously, the Census and Statistics Department conducted a survey in regard to the issue of digital divide and the results are as follows (see Table 9):

**Table 9: Results of the survey about the disparity in having access to computers and the Internet in Hong Kong**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The percentage of households which have personal computers is about 60.6%.</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The percentage of households whose computers are connected with the Internet is 48.7%.</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with higher incomes comprise a larger percentage of those which have personal computers and the Internet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens with older ages comprise a smaller percentage of using personal computers and the Internet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The percentages of using computers for men and women are 51.5% and 47.8% respectively.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The percentages of using the Internet for men and women are 44.8% and 40.6% respectively.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens with higher education levels comprise a larger percentage of using personal computers and the Internet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


We can observe from the above table that the household which has higher income can more likely own a computer and the Internet, whereas people who are younger and more educated can be more possible to use these communication technologies (Women’s Commission 2002).
With respect to grassroots women themselves, they have less access to ICTs due to their lower education level as well as household and personal incomes. These determine Yan Ting’s unfamiliarity with computers and it thus caused her to consume more time to learn some very basic skills like entering her own Chinese name. From the Computer Course, women could have more or less learned computer skills and their self-confidence could be enhanced to a certain extent. As reflected by Yan Ting, although they forgot some computer knowledge obtained from the course in a short period of time and her increased self-efficacy also faded as time went on, she still did not deny that they could get basic computer skills with stronger self-confidence right after the course.

As implied by Yan Ting, women who took part in this programme demanded more opportunities of using computers, and their needs could be met because they had obtained access to the scientific technology, that is, computers. What is more, members did not encounter any familial constraints in participating in this programme simply because “the course was held in the evening and the [learning] time was accommodating and flexible” (Yan Ting). Yet, it was shown that members’ positive change could not be guaranteed by the course. At the time of joining this course, Yan Ting was a full-time housewife. She said frankly that upon completion of the programme there was no change in terms of her employment and computer technology is useless to their grassroots women since what they work is not proportionate to the computer skills they have learned. All the above-mentioned reflect that the Computer Course as a skill training programme could enable women to learn some skills favorable for work by which they could obtain more work skills with stronger self-esteem and self-efficacy, as the course shows that it can meet the entire evaluative criteria, the strategy ‘skill training’ is highly effective.

In addition to the Computer Course, Yan Ting also joined the Domestic Helper Advanced Course. She expressed that women in the course were engaged in learning how to communicate employers, how to do house cleaning step by step, how to use
environmentally-friendly cleaning water partly through the teaching launched by tutors who are experienced domestic helpers and partly through some notes distributed by the staff members. Besides meeting more people in the programme, members like Yan Ting could know more cleaning skills from which their self-confidence was enhanced even though the extent of the enhancement was not very high mainly because they do housework everyday.

Since the participants of this course are grassroots women, their actual demand is rather practical in the sense that what their need was to learn how to clean their houses more easily and systematically. This actual need could have been satisfied as they had really got the relevant skills from notes (Yan Ting). As the programme was held in the morning, some members like Yan Ting was only able to attend one to two lessons on the ground that they have housework to do at that time. So, women were not enabled to take part in the learning process without any familial constraint. Yet, it can still be inferred that women’s employment conditions could be improved after attending the course. As shown by Yan Ting, the course was good for job seeking since she could show employers a proof that she has received the related training. It is obvious that being a skill training programme the Domestic Helper Advanced Course could promote women to learn work skills by which they could obtain more practical cleaning skills useful for employment with stronger self-esteem and self-efficacy. In short, this strategy can meet the entire evaluative criteria. As a result, it can be determined that ‘skill training’ as an empowerment strategy adopted by WWA is highly effective as well.

With respect to the Haircut Skills Basic Training, there were some haircut tutors employed by the staff members from professional salons to teach the related skills and there were altogether twelve lessons with 1 hour every time. Surprisingly, this course was “invested” (Yan Ting) by participants themselves in the sense that women members spent around HK$300 as tuition fees to purchase haircut tools like scissors and dolls’ heads and employ tutors to teach them due to the lack of funding support. Still, half of the tuition fees
could be refunded to women who had full attendance (Oi Lan). Of course, the major activity women did in this course was to learn how to use haircut-used scissors properly, how to make various hairstyles that include both male and female ones, follow tutors to visit the community to do internship by rendering some vulnerable groups like the elderly and mentally retarded people with voluntary haircut services. As illustrated by Chui Ping, in the programme she could have chances to learn not just how to do hairdressing but also some techniques of communicating customers. For instance, “when getting in touch with mentally disabled people, our tutor taught us how we should approach them. As they would have emotional instability and likely attack other people, our tutor told us that we should protect ourselves and ask nurses for help if necessary” (Chui Ping). It is not uncommon to realize that in an initial stage of internship some of the members like Chui Ping felt afraid when giving haircut services to the elderly as they worried that they did not very well and the elderly were unsatisfied, but this kind of problem could be resolved since their tutors who followed them to the community could play the function of enhancing their self-confidence.

Three of the interviewees who took part in this programme had gained similar benefits from the learning process. The first common benefit is the acquisition of haircut skills, which can be seen from the fact that all of them could give haircut service to other people in need. As said by Oi Lan who joined the course in 2005, she has known how to help elderly to do hairdressing, while both Chui Ping and Yan Ting responded that they could now help their children and even their neighbors to do haircut after attending the course. Chui Ping supplemented that “if going outside to find some jobs pertaining to hairdressing, this course is certainly helpful”. With the absorption of more work skills, their self-confidence and self-efficacy had been enhanced as well. Both Chui Ping and Yan Ting commonly felt that they became more confident, particularly in searching for jobs in the labour market. And the increased self-efficacy tended to be derived more from the feeling of being able to help others than merely from the acquisition of haircut skills (Oi Lan).
 CHAPTER FIVE   WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES IN WWA’S PROGRAMMES

It is understandable that women who participated in this programme had an economic demand. Most of them wanted to obtain some basic haircut skills in order to help their family members do hairdressing so that they do not need to spend money having haircut service outside, whereas this kind of need could be satisfied. “It is quite practical as I can help my children do haircut, and it helps me save my money and time since it is rather expensive if having this service outside” said Yan Ting proudly. It has also been shown that women did not have any familial obstacles to participating in the learning process even though the course was held in the morning since it could accommodate their time. Those who need to take their kinds to go back home after school was not constrained from doing internship because the course could arrange the internship to be carried out prior to the time children leave their schools (Chui Ping). Despite the fact that this course would not help women find their jobs right after its completion, members like Chui Ping still thinks that it is useful to seek a job in future. In the meantime, except Oi Lan who has been working as a private domestic helper and earn stable income with HK$3,500 up till now, the other two respondents did part-time jobs. Their unstable working time affected the stability of their incomes adversely, which ranged from HK$1,000 to HK$2,000 or so per month (Yan Ting). Although the training course did not yield any change in women’s employment conditions, members tend to have some changes in other aspects like working attitudes. For example, Chui Ping has realized that she should be more delicate when doing any thing. Because they could visit the community to provide haircut service to both needed people and family members, women could become much happier and their familial relationship could even be more harmonious (Chui Ping; Oi Lan). In other words, women’s positive change could be ensured by the course in any event. It may also be seen that women could actively involve in the training course. As revealed by Yan Ting, women participants were quite realistic as the course was financially supported by them. So, from their perspective, it would less rational if not participating in the course actively. This further explains why the programme could
encourage women to learn hairdressing skills.

As observed from the above, the Haircut Skills Basic Training as a skill training programme could give women opportunities to learn work skills through which they could really obtain more skills helpful to their employment as well as stronger self-esteem and self-efficacy. In other words, the strategy ‘skill training’ can meet all the evaluative criteria. As a result, it can be determined that this empowerment strategy is effective very much.

**Personal and interpersonal empowerment**

As I mentioned earlier, one of the Cooperative Programmes ‘Printing Co-op’ has been cancelled a few years ago and the responsible organizers and participants are unavailable to be interviewed. So, the only way for me is to rely on the data provided by WWA’s documents in order to do evaluation through studying this programme. In regard to the Women Workers’ Concentric Co-op and Women’s Bottle-recycling Co-op, it is likely for me to do interviews since both of them are the existing co-ops run by WWA. Let me firstly put a focus on the Printing Co-op Programme.

For the sake of recruiting new members, the Printing Co-op has organized computer training and mutual learning courses. Although these courses could not help to achieve the goal for recruitment, women have instead got chances to learn new skills like Chinese typing and even teach the skills mutually through which they shared the spirit of cooperation (WWA 2002) which can be deemed as the intensification of collective consciousness. In the very beginning, women lacked self-confidence in bearing the duties for such work as price setting, business consultation, promotion, operating printing machines, etc. With the assistance of organizers, participants could be encouraged to handle the machine operation independently and their self-efficacy as well as self-confidence could therefore be built up eventually. In the meantime, during sharing the above responsibilities women could also grasp chances to learn mutual-support and problem-solving abilities, while the first thing established by this
learning process was the awareness of collectivity (WWA 1999). It is not uncommon that some of the members were blocked from taking part in the co-op business by either familial burden or individual problems of health. This condition could, however, facilitate the process of learning mutual consideration. For instance, one of the participants originally intended to quit the Printing Co-op as she had to do a part-time job in the evening for alleviating her familial economic pressure, but other members creatively came up with an idea “non-labour membership” (WWA 1999: 48) so that the membership of that participant can be retained and she may involve in the Co-op activities when available. This case has exemplified that women in this Co-op Programme are enabled to render mutual aids for one another, which represents that they can receive adequate opportunities to learn the related interpersonal skills from which their collectivity could thus be strengthened. And significantly, the instance has proved that women are able to take part in the empowering process without being obstructed by the obstacles like household burden.

Having realized that another goal of the Printing Co-op is to help women escape from the employers’ exploitation and to enhance their economic power. Nonetheless, to reach this objective is not an easy task. The major reason behind is that women who join the Co-op have to invest their money and even household savings in the business firstly, but those whose monthly incomes are unstable find it impossible to do so. What’s more, some of the women feel guilty to use their familial savings for investment because a large proportion of the savings are contributed by their husbands. Under this situation, these women would be discouraged from joining the Printing Co-op. Even though they join the Co-op, women can only invest a very small amount of money and input a very short time in its business. Due to the lack of running investments, there is just limited equipment applicable in the Co-op, while other materials like paper and printing ink are also the case since it is hard for the members, like many other big companies, to purchase a large amount of them at the low cost (WWA 1999). Given that the small amount of investment has led to the insufficiency of
printing machines with other related materials and women are therefore blocked from practicing the relevant skills, whereas the fact that women decline to join or only spend a short time taking part in the Co-op business has also blocked the process of learning mutual-support and problem-tackling skills is less likely created in the Printing Co-op. As a result of these circumstances, women might not be encouraged to take part in the process of learning both work and interpersonal skills, not to mention to have active participation. So, the Printing Co-op reflects that both the strategies ‘skill training’ and ‘collectivization’ are quite ineffective as they cannot satisfy some of the criteria that include ‘women can be given chances to learn skills’ and ‘women can be engaged in the process of understanding the functions of collectivity’ in the relevant programmes.

As far as the Women Workers’ Concentric Co-op is concerned, women in this programme were fostered to involve in both of its external and internal activities. Two of the interviewees, Mei Yin and Pui Kuen, who joined the Co-op in 2004 and 2001 respectively through their friend’s recommendations have taken part in one of the social actions – i.e., demonstration on January 1st 2007. But the external activities the co-op members participated in are not confined to such social actions. As responded by Mei Yin:

The “Cooperative’s Day” on July 2nd by which I did promotion on the street of Mongkok.
There are cooperative’s activities held two times every month, and we attend meetings with other cooperative alternately.

What Mei Yin mentioned the ‘other cooperative’ has indicated that the cooperative is by no means the patent of WWA. In reality, on top of the Concentric Co-op formed by WWA at CUHK, there are the other two co-ops run by different associations at City University of Hong Kong and Lingnan University respectively. Three of these co-ops have constituted a “Cooperative Alliance” (Lai Fong), while another member, Lai Fong, describes it as a “triad” and she frequently takes part in discussions launched in the Alliance’s conferences.

As understood in the previous chapter, the internal activities refer to doing business management in both the convenient store and the photocopying businesses, whereas this kind
of activities entails the meaning of learning commercial skills. In fact, members in these two businesses could be facilitated to take part in such activities. Lai Fong can be seen as an example because she could be engaged in the convenient store business which involves maintaining the business daily operation, setting prices and even communicating the guests who are university students predominantly. What’s more, all the Co-op members have chances to be on duty in the Union alternately. Whenever students come to the Union for photocopying, the member who is on duty is responsible for receiving orders and then does the photocopying tasks (Lai Fong). Very often, students who have a plenty of things to photocopy and have no time to collect at once would choose to use the stay-over-night photocopying service. In this regard, the member who will be on duty on the next day takes responsibility to give back the photocopies to those students. All in all, we may see that women could be encouraged to learn different sorts of work skills, particularly business skills in the Concentric Co-op Programme, and one of the annual report has also recorded that women have gradually mastered the business operation of both the photocopying and the store with the growth of the cooperative (WWA 2003).

Indeed, the convenient store demands mutual responsibility and members hence need to have division of labour. Though each of them takes care of their respective work independently after division of labour, they would still give help to one another. Lai Fong told me that in the store some sisters are assigned to order drinks and snacks, and she is responsible for ordering newspapers. Whenever they find that there is a lack of necessities like sauce for cooking food, they would remind the responsible member to order them. Because the convenient store adopts the rotation system, each of the members also has a chance of taking the responsibility to arrange the working schedule. Those who take this duty would listen to their sisters about who cannot go to work on certain days. In the event that there are lots of members taking rest on a particular day, member who arranges the timetable

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3 Co-op members prefer using ‘sisters’ to describe their co-workers.
has to come up with some ways to persuade some of the sisters who do not have important things to do to go back to work, whereas they would accommodate others and are ready to come back. Sometimes, if the member who works the night shift is not able to come to the store on time, other members who work the day shift will also be considerate and continue to work until that member come back to the Co-op. That’s why Lai Fong said that what they do in the Co-op includes not only learning work skills but also learning division of labour.

By the same token, since members in the photocopying service work by turns as well, good communication between participants is needed. If a member has received an order which is to be handled on the next day today but she will not need to come to work tomorrow, she would clearly write down the details about what the student requires them to do so that another member who will be on duty tomorrow can understand how to photocopy and when the student will come to collect. What’s more, women can give assistance to other members in need. As shown by Shui Man, whenever her sisters do not know how to operate the photocopiers, she would teach them by which she is able to learn mutual-support and problem-solving skills.

From the above, it is not difficult for us to observe that women have engaged in the processes of learning work skills as well as learning interpersonal skills in the Concentric Co-op. In conversing with the Co-op members, it was found that none of them has benefited from these processes. In the convenient store, what they have learned are the skills that are useful for their employment, which include transaction and selling skills like communicating with customers. In the meantime, members like Hoi Yi also admitted that they could have stronger self-efficacy and self-confidence after acquiring these work skills. When I asked Lai Fong what she has benefited from the store activities, she proudly expressed that:

I had never worked in this business. After working here, I could learn how to operate the store, take goods and set prices […] The more operation skills I got, the more self-confidence I could have. From knowing nothing to knowing more and even having mastered, my self-abased feeling has naturally reduced with getting more self-confidence.
As for the photocopying service, women participants have absorbed some basic skills like operating photocopiers. Both Shui Man and Pui Kuen seem to prefer working in the photocopying service to working in the convenient store. Shui Man noted “I found the photocopying business more challenging as I need to operate the photocopiers with many different functions”, whereas Pui Kuen clearly showed that she likes photocopying as she had never tried it before and she found it interesting when joining the Co-op and started to help students photocopy. This might somehow reflect that doing photocopying business not merely enables women to have more related skills but also let them find happiness from the learning process. Although Lai Fong modestly claimed that she does not work in the Student Union and is not familiar with photocopying very much, she still recognized that she has basically understood how to photocopy and is able to help students. Hence, their stronger self-esteem and self-efficacy are derived not simply from the acquisition of work skills but also from the subjective feeling that “I am able to help others” (Lai Fong).

Regarding the benefits gained from the process of learning interpersonal skills in both the convenient store and photocopying service, most of the members agreed that their collective awareness has been strengthened. Truly, it is quite normal that there must be lots of arguments yielded among the Co-op members as they “come from different family and cultural background with various work experiences” (Lai Fong), and a thought that “we can only share wealth but not difficulties” (Pui Kuen) thus arose in the very beginning. Yet, with making cooperation for a longer and longer time, they found that their interpersonal relationship has largely been improved to the extent they can talk to each other more easily and can thus understand mutually. Though they did not indicate that whether or not their stronger collectivity was resulted from the process of learning mutual-help and problem-tackling skills, it can still be inferred that these two things are interrelated to a large degree since both of the convenient store and photocopying service involve such a learning process. Importantly, it is less reasonable that the enhancement of collectivity is derived from
the process of learning work skills – i.e., individual activity, since logically it has more to do with the experience of mutual support and problem solution – i.e., interpersonal activity. So, the improvement of their interpersonal relationship and the increase in their collective awareness are simultaneously resulted from cooperation. However, there is still one of the members, Shui Man, whose collectivity seems not to be intensified through such a learning process as she noted that “when going outside to work, I found that getting in touch with a large group of people is quite troublesome as we hold different opinions. The worst thing is that we cannot understand mutually and I do not know why even though working [in the co-op] for such a long time”. This might reveal that even though the Co-op could give her chances to learn interpersonal skills, Shui Man still could not be aware of the functions and importance of groups.

It is not unusual to know that women who take part in the Concentric Co-op mostly have economic needs (Wai San), but some of them like Pui Kuen and Lai Fong also have ‘ideological’ needs in the sense that they are enthusiastic about joining the group that has such idealism as fairness and equality. In any case, all their demands have already been satisfied by the Co-op. In terms of economic needs, members could earn more incomes and enjoy more flexible working hours. Mei Yin told me:

It (what I need) is quite philistine because the amount of money earned from the co-op is rather attractive, whereas the working time is flexible with friendliness […] we can choose on which day we have a day-off, but we cannot know when is a day-off if working outside […] Although the income is not that very stable, we can still earn money as long as going back here to work and our earnings are hourly-calculated.

As the Co-op also talks about fair responsibility and equal treatment (Lai Fong), members’ ideological needs could thus be met. Moreover, as observed by Wai San, members are rather active in participating activities in the Co-op chiefly because the Cooperative is a kind of social enterprises and its finance is independent in the sense that there is no need to return the profits earned from the convenient store and photocopying service to WWA. According to Social Enterprise Resource Centre (2006) that is formed by HKCSS, “Social Enterprises (SE)
achieve social objective by adopting entrepreneurial strategy and business model” and their social missions include creating employment opportunities for workers who are less competitive, such as those with low educational attainments and low skills, middle-aged women, etc., encouraging workers to be self-reliant and integrate into society as well as building up social capital. There are altogether three types of SE in Hong Kong, including social firm, social cooperative and community economic development project (also refer to Table 10).

Table 10: Major types of social enterprise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Mode of operation</th>
<th>Mode of operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Firm</td>
<td>Firms initiated and operated by NGOs.</td>
<td>• Usually established by NGOs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• NGOs responsible for the management and operation of the firms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• In most cases, disadvantaged groups are employed as staff of SE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Co-operatives</td>
<td>The business is democratically managed by the SE workers.</td>
<td>• Some of them are initiated by NGOs, but they are not subsidiaries of NGOs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Workers are responsible for the management and operation of SE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• It is characterized by a participatory nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Economic Development Project</td>
<td>They are community-based and have an extra purpose of benefiting the local community.</td>
<td>• Community involvement and inclusion are particularly emphasized.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Among these three types of SE, the social cooperative also falls into two types: “A-type co-operatives” manage social, health and educational services; and “B-type co-operatives” aim to re-integrate disadvantaged groups into the workforce through various activities (OECD 1999: 22). The Concentric Co-op held by WWA can be classified into the second
type of cooperative since it also attempts to give women chances to be self-employed in both
the convenient store and photocopying businesses. And it is also recognized as one of the
local social enterprises by HKCSS. As the Co-op is independent financially and its members
bear the duty of managing its operation, women are thus stimulated to actively participate in
the Co-op’s activities. This also provides another explanation about why this programme
could encourage women to learn work and interpersonal skills. In spits of financial
independence, the Concentric Co-op is still closely linked with WWA. Lai Fong commented
that:

Our Co-op does not have relationship with WWA [economically] as it is self-financed […] we
hold meetings to make decisions ourselves but we still cooperate with WWA and ask for
their (staff members’) suggestions […] the Co-op was planned and formed by WWA and it
can be seen as our [Co-op’s] mother or grandpa. It does not manage our finance but it will
assign some staff members to attend our meetings […] In case there is any argument among
us, it will discuss with us and provide opinions […] so this role is crucial and there will not
be good without the mediator.

Concerning their employment conditions, all of the respondents who take part in the
Co-op have experienced good changes overall. Prior to joining the programme, most of them
were unemployed and the reasons behind had to do with economic recession in 1997, the
outbreak of SARS in 2003 and the ever-persistent age discrimination. Originally, Lai Fong
worked in a clinic but she had to resign from her job as her husband asked her to stay at
home for caring their kids. When she wanted to go back to do her previous occupation, she
was rejected by employers as she has already disconnected with that occupation and she has
become a middle-aged woman. “It was particularly true that the clinic doctors are often
younger than me, were they willing to employ a ‘mother’ in their clinic? That’s why I found
no jobs”, said Lai Fong ironically. Even though they had work to do before unemployment,
their employment conditions were bad to the extent that the working time was 12 hours per
day, the income was unstable and employers were exploitative. Hoi Yi was a restaurant

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worker before unemployment and she had experienced income exploitation, that is, only received two-third of the original income during the SARS period. Yet, the income had not been increased after being deducted and there was no additional income for overtime work. The other way round, after they joined the Co-op, their income has become more stable and can more or less support their family living though they only work on a part-time mode. As regards the working time, they can now negotiate it with one another. Although Pui Kuen said that the everyday working hours tend to become longer, they can still decide on which days they get day-offs. Furthermore, since their children have already grown up, most of the interviewees do not encounter familial obstacles to taking part in the programme. Nevertheless, in the very beginning some of them had faced some constraints from their families. In the case of Mei Yin, her children felt afraid that she would be cheated because anyone who joins the Co-op need firstly to give HK$2,000 to be a shareholder and as part of the running costs. Luckily, this barrier has been resolved as she found that the Co-op can be run successfully and she can get returns eventually.

The Concentric Co-op, as a programme for the strategy of ‘skill training’, has given women the opportunity to learn some skills favorable for work. The women could really obtain more work skills and stronger self-esteem and self-efficacy. Meanwhile, most of them were encouraged to learn mutual-aid and problem-solving skills in the Co-op, as a relevant programme of ‘collectivization’, so that their collective awareness could really be enhanced. In other words, both of the empowerment strategies can meet all the evaluative criteria as listed in Table 4. As a result, it can be determined that ‘skill training’ and ‘collectivization’ adopted by WWA are very effective.

As regards the Bottle Recycling Co-op, two of my interviewees who took part in this programme expressed that the activities they joined in the Co-op included learning some work skills. On the surface, it is quite contradictory because Wai San has already denied that this programme had such an objective but members could instead involve in learning work
skills. However, in practice, there is no contradiction since it is merely the members’ own perception that they were learnt when completing the tasks of recycling which they were not familiar with before. In other words, the Co-op certainly did not aim at enabling women to learn work skills, whereas it is the women’s subjective interpretation that they were learning work skills when they did recycling jobs. Perhaps, this can be deemed as a ‘bonus’ outcome simply because it has never been expected by the Association. However, in actuality, participants could really absorb some knowledge, if not work skills, about the usage of recycled bottles and what materials can be recycled as commented by two members Wing Mui and Fung Lin. On the other hand, the Recycling Co-op aims to engage women in learning mutual-support and problem-solving skills, and this goal has been achieved. As responded by Fung Lin, in the programme she did really learn interpersonal skills in addition to meeting more people there.

In the meantime, it was understood from the above that women in the Recycling Co-op could be enabled to learn such interpersonal skills as mutual-support and problem-solving skills. The Co-op members had benefited from this learning process. In the case of Wing Mui, she found that:

My cooperation spirit and collective consciousness have been enhanced. Previously, I was quite individualistic other than sociable and I disliked doing things with a group of people. But I am now different from the past after participation [in the Co-op] since there are lots of things which demand cooperation.

Since the programme entails the activity of learning cooperation, it is safe to argue that upon being involved in cooperation not only could Wing Mui realize more the importance of group work but her own collectivity-orientation has been strengthened. Fung Lin has got advantages similar to Wing Mui as she told me that she has learned more interpersonal skills and obtained higher collective awareness at the same time. The extra valuable thing Fung Lin has realized is the importance of reaching consensus among sisters, mutual tolerance and listening to others.

In addition, most participants demanded economic benefits. Wai San admitted that the
majority of the members come from grassroots social class and so they need income to take care of their families. These women’s economic needs could somewhat be satisfied. In terms of earning money, the income is hourly-calculated and members could earn HK$30 per hour with HK$1,000 every month. Although the amount of income is not adequate for women to support the whole family, it can at least help them maintain their own living. As for caring for the family, as women only work for fours per day for three days or so per week, they could have enough time to manage their housework after work (Fung Lin).

Indeed, women’s actual needs are not confined to the economic aspect. Just like Wing Mui and Fung Lin, their needs include looking for the sense of satisfaction and happiness, while they did agree that their demands have also been met. Regarding the attitude of the Co-op participants, there are variations among them and it is not all of the members who perform actively in taking part in the Co-op’s activities. As observed by Wai San, those who seldom participate in the community consider the Co-op to be a new thing and do not know how to get along with other members; those who have more experiences of participating in the community are more familiar with team work; some bear various problems and identities like single mothers and middle-aged women which impose pressure on them and lead them to be unable to work with others. Since Wai San did not illustrate whether the majority of the members are active or not in terms of involvement, it is less convincing to argue that this programme could guarantee women’s active participation. Nevertheless, she still stressed that with the end of this programme approaching, all of the members do hope they can continue to work in the Co-op as they think that it is meaningful and they could contribute to the society. Thus, it can be argued that this programme could encourage women to involve in the empowering process.

In regard to their employment conditions, it can be inferred that the women experienced positive changes. At the time of joining this programme, both Wing Mui and Fung Lin were unemployed. Fung Lin recalled that she worked in a sewing factory at the past and the then
working time was from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and even 8 p.m. if overtime work was required. Though she earned HK$5,000 per month and the monthly income was stable, Fung Lin became unemployed at last since the factory was relocated to the Mainland. Yet, after joining the Co-op, there are instead more time available for her to meet her friends and do housework although she earn less income then before, while she found that there is no pressure imposed on her in the Co-op. Even though Wing Mui did not express how her employment condition was in the Co-op, I could affirm that Wing Mui has experienced positive change because she has shifted from unemployment to being employed after joining the programme. Meaningfully, women members even have good changes in their daily life. Fung Ling was able to help other people besides obtaining more knowledge, whereas Wing Mui found herself more outspoken then the past and her social circle had been broadened as well. On the other hand, both respondents are not blocked by the familial factors to involve in the programme. The Bottle Recycling Co-op, as a relevant programme of ‘collectivization’, could render women with opportunities to learn interpersonal skills by which their collective awareness could really be strengthened. In other words, this strategy can meet all the evaluative criteria. Hence, it can be concluded that that ‘collectivization’ as an empowerment strategy adopted by WWA is quite effective.

Political empowerment

As discussed before, the training course arranged by the Trade Union for cleaners, which is a part of WWA, involves several major activities like the workshop, the preparation conference for social actions, district visits as well as management of labour affairs. The participants learnt the process of learning political skills. Originally, I wanted to interview two categories of the course participants – i.e., Union’s committee members and community volunteers, only the former one agreed to be interviewed. These two categories of participants are merely different in occupation but the activities they join in the course are
almost the same and the responses given by Ka Ying as an association secretary also covers information about the experiences of the volunteers. Since she joined the Trade Union in 2003, Yan Ting has been elected as one of the committee members. Yan Ting elaborated that in the training course she could grasp chances to learn skills for social change through asking women volunteers to join social actions held by the Union during the period of labour strikes and following up some cases pertinent to cleaners. Last year, she has managed a case involving a cleaner who had been dismissed because of her age and her employer wanted to employ younger people, but the employer had owed her wages and severance payments. Indeed, this kind of conflict between employers and workers is getting more serious, which can be reflected from the increasing trend of employers’ default on both wages and severance pays (see Table 11).

### Table 11: Cases of industrial disputes followed up by Labour Service Centre by items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Payment in lieu of notice</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>+22</td>
<td>+15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual leave</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage offence</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>+13</td>
<td>+13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severance pay</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>+6</td>
<td>+6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statutory holiday</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>+8</td>
<td>+10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long service payment</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>-12</td>
<td>-14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest day</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>+8</td>
<td>+42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of year payment</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>+11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPF</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+7</td>
<td>+350%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-23.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, Labour Service Centre. Table 2. 2007. When the cleaner brought her case to the Trade Union, Yan Ting followed her to lodge the complaint with the Labour Department and the Labour Tribunal against the misbehavior of the employer. And more recently, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department decided to reduce the working hours of toilet cleaners who are on the night shift. This act would
further worsen the livelihoods of these cleaners as their income level is already extremely low – i.e., HK$3,100 per month only which is the lowest among the grassroots occupations (see also Table 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Hourly wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning</td>
<td>$23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dish washing</td>
<td>$23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast-food shop</td>
<td>$22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet</td>
<td>$19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Trade Union for Cleaners, WWA. August, 2006.

As soon as this case was received by the Union, Yan Ting discussed it with other committee members and mobilized women volunteers to stage a protest.

As demonstrated from the aforementioned, women were given enough opportunities to learn some skills needed for social change, which include organizing and mobilizing skills. This is an empowering process. On top of acquiring life experiences and becoming more optimistic towards her own life, Yan Ting agreed that she has obtained some political skills. As the training course also rendered committee members with chances to realize more the situation of cleaners, another benefit Yan Ting had gained from this learning process is a better understanding of cleaners’ working conditions and she felt that she faces the same situation as these cleaners. She had sympathy for the cleaners. She also admitted that she had desire to help more cleaners. However, she said, “even though I want to help them, I might still not be able to do so. Sometimes, cleaners who suffer from industrial injuries prefer continuing to work but do not hope other people to help as they think that others cannot help them”. So, it is not because women committees lack abilities or enthusiasm for giving assistance, but because the cleaners held pessimistic attitudes and thought that there was nobody to help them resolve their problems and plights. Similar to the case of Yan Ting, women volunteers knew more about the difficulties the cleaners encountered and had a better mastery of the Labour Law. This can be seen from Ka Ying’s comments:
Cleaners are always here around us, but we might not pay attention to them. After joining the training course, they (women volunteers) begin to realize that the cleaners are suffering from a working environment that is not ideal. So they are more concerned about the people in the community.

And Ka Ying recognized that the training course does have positive effects on the intensification of women volunteers’ desire for changing the whole social structure and cleaners’ situation, which are what their Trade Union has been intending to facilitate.

The actual needs of women who take part in the training course are to learn something and to render help for cleaners (Ka Ying; Yan Ting), while their demands were met on the ground that they were able to know more political skills and other workers’ current situation and to give their hands to the cleaners in need. As regards employment conditions, it was revealed that women participants did not experience any positive change. Yan Ting expressed that at the time of joining the programme she worked in an elderly house for HK$2,000. She noted that originally her income level was HK$6,000 or so, but her income had been reduced to HK$2,000 after taking a holiday mainly because the elderly house was contracted out to a private company. After joining the training course, she found that her employment conditions had not changed. Although she now works as a school janitor, she did not get it through participation in the course. Even so, Yan Ting was pleased to say that she has become more optimistic in facing problems. For women volunteers, their horizons have been broadened as well (Ka Ying). Hence, the training course ensured women’s positive change, especially in terms of their life views. Nevertheless, Ka Ying confessed that women face some familial obstacles in taking part in the training programme. As remarked a WWA report, “[i]t is suggested that in future, the training for the women community volunteers must fit their time constraint so that they can help to carry out our campaign in where they live” (WWA 2002). In the case of Yan Ting, she also illustrated that she encounters familial constraints on involving in the course since she needs to spend more time doing housework and going to work outside. Yet, the course could still accommodate the working time so that she could
continue to participate in the programme. What is more, Ka Ying told me that there is variation in women’s reaction while they are participating in the programme. Hence not every one is active. In spite of the familial constraints and the unclear condition about women’s active participation, it can still be seen from the above that women tend not to be discouraged from taking part in the process of learning organizing and mobilizing skills.

All in all, being a leadership training programme, the Trade Union’s training course could give women opportunities to learn skills for social change through which they could really obtain more political skills. It indicates that ‘leadership training’ can meet all the evaluative criteria and it can therefore be concluded that this empowerment strategy adopted by WWA is highly effective.
CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

6.1. Discussion

**Empowerment strategies adopted by WWA**

The previous chapter has shown that WWA adopts all of the empowerment strategies reviewed in Chapter Two, which include personal consciousness raising, skill training, collectivization, political consciousness raising and leadership training. Interestingly, some of these strategies are even implemented simultaneously by one programme set up by the Association. Concerning the Bauhinia Group – Middle-aged Single Women Development Scheme, as its objectives are to encourage women to express their feeling as a single middle-aged woman through sharing sessions and to share their common experience and discuss the impacts of patriarchy on them, these are already part of the aims of both personal and political consciousness raising. Being a relevant programme used to carry out a certain empowerment strategy, its goals must be the same as those of the strategy. Given that part of the objectives of the Bauhinia Group are the same as those of both personal and political consciousness raising, the scheme can thus be seen as more than a relevant programme for personal consciousness raising but also a programme for political consciousness raising. The existence of the personal and political consciousness-raising programmes already represents that both ‘personal and political consciousness raising’ have been implemented by the organizers, and it can therefore be said that WWA has adopted these two empowerment strategies to empower grassroots women. As the Bauhinia Group is a common means for putting these two strategies into practice, WWA has in fact implemented both the strategies in the meantime by setting up one programme. As suggested by GlenMaye (1998), personal and political consciousness raising are inseparable.

By the same token, the Women’s Concentric Cooperative aims at encouraging women to
learn work skills, particularly those for business management as well as enhancing women’s collective awareness. These are all the objectives of ‘skill training’ and ‘collectivization’.

The remaining programmes, including the training courses organized by WMRC, the Bottle Recycling Co-op and the training course arranged by the Trade Union for Cleaners, are also empowerment strategies for skill training, collectivization and leadership training.

More remarkably, the Association has tried to put some of its empowerment strategies into practice by forming more than one corresponding programmes. The strategy ‘skill training’ is the most typical example since it has been carried out by four skill training programmes, the Computer Course, Domestic Helper Advanced Course, Haircut Skill Basic Training and even Women’s Concentric Co-op. Another instance is ‘collectivization’. This strategy is implemented by forming three relevant programmes – i.e., the Women’s Printing Co-op, the Women Workers’ Concentric Co-op and the Bottle Recycling Co-op.

Additionally, the outcomes of the Concentric Co-op and the Trade Union’s training course reveal that WWA has been adopting some empowerment strategies unintentionally. The Concentric Co-op has organized a number of social actions like demonstration for universal suffrage, actions for fighting against domestic violence and even the anti-WTO action through which women used the perspective of grassroots women to examine the influences of WTO on them. In spite of the fact that these activities or processes are not the same as those of political consciousness raising specified in Table 3 – i.e., ‘to encourage women to analyze the impacts of male domination during sharing common experience in the consciousness-raising programmes’, they play the similar functions of enhancing women’s understanding about the concept ‘the personal is political’. With the WTO pushing the neo-liberalist policies, the Hong Kong SAR Government under the leadership of Donald Tsang has announced to adopt “Small Government, Big Market” in place of the “Positive Non-interventionism” policy (Hong Kong People’s Alliance on Globalization [HKPA] 2006: 3-6). As a result of such a neo-liberalist policy, working grassroots women have especially
borne the brunt as the associated policies like privatization and outsourcing of public services further exacerbate their employment conditions, such as unemployment, long working hours and low wages (HKPA 2006). Many women may not realize the fundamental cause of their suffering since theoretically those who experience such an adverse condition would choose to escape from identifying that they belong to the group of victims and even owe their suffering to the personal destiny (Fung 1994). However, these WWA participants who engaged in the external activities like actions for fighting against domestic violence and the anti-WTO action could have the chance to meet together to learn the fact that what they have encountered are generally shared by other grassroots women in the society. They may also discuss the reasons behind their suffering. One of the interviewees, Lai Fong, who has been taking part in the Concentric Co-op for around six years and involved in such external activities, the benefits stated by her might to some degree shed light on the effects of the activities:

Some women who do not have jobs or those who scantily get in touch with the society now have more connection [with the society] and got more knowledge. It is because having connection with the society would lead them to have more knowledge naturally.

Truly, what Lai Fong mentioned has already indicated participation in social actions like demonstration and the campaign against domestic violence represents “having connection with the society”, while “lead them to have more knowledge” has implied the understanding about the concept “the personal is political” and these two things are causally related as suggested by her. All of these reflect that the Concentric Co-op play the role of consciousness raising. Nevertheless, since the objectives are not pre-defined by WWA at all, it can only be contended that the Association has unintentionally implemented and thus adopted the strategy ‘political consciousness raising’.

Regarding the Trade Union’s training course, its activities include both the workshop and district visits. In the workshop, some cleaners are invited to share their working conditions with the Union’s committee members and women volunteers, while district visits
entail knowing further the cleaners’ situation. In actuality, these activities can also be seen as
the processes of personal and political consciousness raising although their contents are
different from those listed in Table 3 on the surface. It is because as long as cleaners come to
the workshop to talk about their employment conditions, women can be given chances to
know their own plight and identify the commonality in their situations. Though it appears
that these effects are less applicable to women volunteers as they did not work as a cleaner
and so they might not share the cleaner’s feelings. However this is not the case, as noted by
Ka Ying:

Women volunteers have never worked as cleaners before and they may include women
workers who worked in clothing or electronic factories, so what links both women
[volunteers] and cleaners together is by no means the identity as a cleaner but that of a worker
[…] both are workers and have [commonly] faced the impacts of the working environment.

Yan Ting also expressed that she had “learned the situation of many, if not some, cleaners”
and she felt that she and the cleaners had a lot in common. The women now had a stronger
understanding of the concept ‘the personal is political’, and the existence of this effect also
confirms that the above activities are the process of political consciousness raising. Again, as
the goals are not pre-set by WWA, so it can only be argued that the Association has
unintentionally implemented and thus adopted both the empowerment strategies.

**Effectiveness of the empowerment strategies adopted by WWA**

In the last chapter, the task of evaluating the effectiveness of the empowerment
strategies adopted by WWA has already been done. However, as we can observe from
Chapter Four, there is more than one programme which could represent the adoption of a
particular empowerment strategy. For example, three of the training courses arranged by
WWA’s Resource Centre can reflect the adoption of ‘skill training’, and so on and so forth.
Although these WWA’s programmes are the related programmes of certain strategies and I
could do evaluation on a specific strategy through studying several programmes relevant to
that strategy, there is a variation of the evaluation results and this thus leads to some
confusions about the effectiveness. For instance, both the Computer Course and Domestic Helper Course are the skill training programmes, but one of them might reflect that ‘skill training’ is very effective and another one might reflect that this strategy is not so effective. In this regard, the better way of overcoming this problem is to use an integrated approach to do an overall evaluation. Let us again take the case of ‘skill training’ as an example. In the event that the Computer Course reflects this strategy cannot meet a certain criterion but the remaining skill training programmes reflect that it can satisfy that criterion, then I would conclude that ‘skill training’ can meet the criterion. And finally I will evaluate its effectiveness in accordance with the number of criteria it can meet. To clearly illustrate what criteria and how many criteria the empowerment strategies adopted by WWA could meet, I have listed all these evaluation results in the table below (see Table 13).
## Table 13: Results of evaluation: criteria the empowerment strategies can meet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Criteria the strategies can meet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal consciousness raising</strong></td>
<td>- Women can be encouraged to define their own experiences in their language in the consciousness-raising programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skill training</strong></td>
<td>- Women can be given chances to learn skills in the training programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Women’s actual personal power (skills) and psychological (self-efficacy) personal power can be strengthened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectivization</strong></td>
<td>- Women can be engaged in the process of understanding the functions of collectivity in the relevant programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Women’s interpersonal power can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political consciousness raising</strong></td>
<td>- Women can be encouraged to analyze the impacts of male domination during sharing their common experience in the consciousness-raising programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Women’s understanding about the concept “the individual is political” and their actual political power could be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership training</strong></td>
<td>- Women can be provided with chances to learn skills for social change in the training programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Women’s actual political power can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For both personal and political consciousness raising, the criteria ‘women’s self-esteem and potential political power being enhanced through the corresponding empowering processes’ were not used to evaluate these two strategies because of the limited information given by the annual reports and official website (see also Chapter Five for details).

Overall, all of the WWA’s empowerment strategies are highly effectiveness. That both personal and political consciousness raising are effective should be attributed to the merits of group. Without doubt, at the initial stage these two strategies were not very effective since they could not encourage women to involve in the consciousness-raising processes and this can be reflected from the remark that they were quite passive towards the group activities (WWA 2003). Indeed, this phenomenon is pertaining to the difficulties of women participants themselves. Having known that the participants of the Bauhinia Group are single middle-aged women who suffer from age discrimination and sexism which make them unable to understand they are deprived and to define their experiences in their own language (GlenMaye 1998), they might not actively express their own feelings, not to mention sharing common experience. GlenMaye who has used these strategies to empower women also encountered the similar condition. She commented that “[t]his seems especially true when
women are asked to describe their feelings about a situation where they have been victimized or treated unjustly [...] The power to name their own experience in their own language has been previously denied to women, oppressed by silence or being forced to use the language of the oppressor” (GlenMaye 1998: 37). This more or less explains why such strategies could not ensure women’s active participation in the empowering processes. Still, their objectives could be attained at a later stage and this can be seen from women’s comments that they could share their feelings as well as the fact that they were able to acquire some political skills. Actually, the group as a format of the relevant programme is highly effective for implementing both of the empowerment strategies. We have understood that the Association made use of the Bauhinia Group – Middle-aged Women Development Scheme as a programme for achieving the aims of both personal and political consciousness raising, and the scheme was exactly in the mode of a group. As illustrated above, groups are good for both the processes of personal and political consciousness raising. Groups can have the merit of leading members to more clearly identify “the social basis of their disadvantage and their common interests in changing the conditions” in the sense that “they can get a better understanding of the political dimension of their situation” (Fung 1994). Because groups can facilitate the empowering process, the Bauhinia Group could therefore enable women to analyze and discuss the influences of such political forces as patriarchy during the sharing process. What is more, the fact that the participants with the common social background – i.e., single middle-aged women at the grassroots level, should be another contributing factor of high effectiveness. As discussed in the second chapter, when the mutual aid group is used for ‘consciousness raising’, homogeneity of members’ characteristics like gender, race, sexual orientation or commonality of situation can help reach the aim of the strategy (Lee 1994). Since the women recruited by WWA to join the Bauhinia Group are also homogenous in terms of social position, this might be considered to be a factor making the programme successful in achieving the objectives of both personal and political consciousness raising.
And these empowerment strategies could thus meet all of the evaluative criteria.

As regards the strategy ‘skill training’, its full effectiveness has partly to do with tutors who are employed to teach women work skills. It is not because these tutors are professional enough to teach women, but because they follow women to do internship for further training up their skills. The presence of the tutors can play a function of relieving women’s anxiety so that they could learn how to improve their skills smoothly and then absorb the skills more effectively. And the internship itself in fact strengthened women’s work skills. In addition, the Cooperative is conducive to the achievement of empowerment, As stressed by Lui and Wong (1995: 47), a cooperative is a “social unit” in which members are “then able to further develop mutual-aid activities”. In other words, a cooperative can have the function of fostering the process of learning interpersonal skills and the possibility of the increase in women’s collective awareness is therefore higher. On top of this merit, the cooperative itself is a kind of social enterprise (SE) which is financially independent and its members are self-responsible for handling its daily operation, so women could be stimulated to take part in the Co-op’s activities more actively (Social Enterprise Resource Centre 2006). That’s why nearly all of the Co-op Programmes could enable women to learn mutual-aid and problem-solving and their collectivity could thus be enhanced, while the strategy ‘collectivization’ could meet all the criteria as a result.

Moreover, it is safe to argue that the key to the high effectiveness of ‘leadership training’ lies in the model of ‘participatory learning’. As far as we have known, the Trade Union’s leadership training programme provides women with chances to learn some political skills through such activities as the workshop, preparation conference, district visits and management of labour affairs. The fourth one was the activity which most likely leads to the result of the training process. It is because while women follow up certain labour cases that involve mobilizing women volunteers to join social actions and following cleaners to lodge complaints with the Labour Department, they are not just engaged in learning the skills for
social change but also given opportunities to practise them. This undeniably increases the likelihood of the acquisition of such political skills. Of course, the good teaching quality of the organizers is also an important reason why the training course could enable women to learn these skills. Briefly, the reasons behind all of the above strategies’ effectiveness should take into account such elements as the format of the related programmes set up for strategy implementation, the mode of activities arranged by the programmes, the teaching quality of the staff members who are in charge of certain programmes, as well as the conditions of participants.

6.2. Conclusion

This research project pursued a fundamental objective of delving into the empowerment strategies adopted by local women’s concern groups and their effectiveness. I took WWA as a case study and study the strategies adopted by WWA for empowering grassroots women and how effective these empowerment strategies were. I started my study by reviewing the empowerment strategies that are universally adopted by organizations and scholars in different parts of the world, which include personal consciousness raising, skill training, collectivization, political consciousness raising and leadership training, and then developed a series of evaluative criteria. This study was conducted by such qualitative research methods as historiography and in-depth interviews. Through historical research, this study found that the case I studied, WWA, has taken all of the commonly adopted empowerment strategies. The data gathered through in-depth interviews confirmed this. In general, there are altogether three interesting scenarios. Firstly, some of the WWA’s empowerment strategies were put into effect simultaneously by setting up one programme. Examples include personal consciousness raising together with political consciousness raising and skill training together with collectivization. Secondly, WWA tried to carry out part of its strategies by setting up more than one corresponding programmes. For instance, the strategy ‘skill training’ is
implemented through forming various skill training programmes which include the Computer Course, the Domestic Helper Advanced Course, the Haircut Skills Basic Training, the Women’s Printing and Concentric Cooperatives. And thirdly, two of the WWA’s empowerment programmes – i.e., the Women’s Concentric Co-op and the training course arranged by the Trade Union for Cleaners, have reflected that both personal and political consciousness raising are implemented and adopted unintentionally.

Because of the fact that the ultimate goal of every empowerment strategy is to improve women’s working situations, the general employment conditions of grassroots women have thus been explored in this study. It was shown that women who joined the programmes pertinent to WWA’s empowerment strategies were originally either jobless or working in poor situations like low wages and long working time. Although only some of the participants can enjoy better employment conditions, all the women commonly feel that they were empowered at the personal, interpersonal and political levels. Overall, upon evaluation this project discovered that nearly all of the empowerment strategies taken by the Association are very effective. The group approach and the characteristics of cooperative suggested by Lee (1994) and Lui and Wong (1995) respectively help provide explanations for the higher level of effectiveness of particular strategies that encompass both personal and political consciousness raising as well as collectivization. The main reasons for the effectiveness of the empowerment strategies can be attributed to the relevant programmes of such strategies, including their formats, activities arranged by the programmes as well as the organizers who are responsible for them. It is believed that the case of WWA have revealed the conditions of other women’s organizations and I do hope that this research can, to some extent, contribute to our understanding about the general conditions of the empowerment strategies taken by other women’s concern groups and their effectiveness.
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APPENDICES

Appendix I: In-depth interview guide for WWA’s organizers

Part A: General Questions
1. Since one of the major objectives of WWA is to empower grassroots women, what strategies does the Association adopt to reach this aim?
2. Under what background are these strategies adopted for empowering grassroots women?
3. What are the objectives of these strategies?
4. What attitudes do women have when participating in the relevant programmes?
5. Why do they take part in these programmes?
6. How do the strategies adopted meet the actual needs of women?
7. What changes do women have after participation, and why?
8. What obstacles do women come across during participation?
9. How do the responsible organizers help women overcome such obstacles?
10. Overall, in what areas do you think that the existing strategies need to be improved?

Part B: Specific Questions

2.1. About Bauhinia Group – Middle-aged Women Development Scheme
11. Under what background is this programme introduced by WWA?
12. What are the objectives of it?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Any other aims, including the aims of enhancing the understanding about women’s own situation in order to increase their self-esteem as well as the aims of enhancing women’s understanding about “the personal is political” so as to enhance their political power?
13. What activities have women joined within the programme?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Any other activities, including expressing their own feelings, sharing common experiences with other participants and discuss the impacts of social pressure/discrimination on single middle-aged women?
14. How are women encouraged to join such activities?
15. What are the obstacles to encouraging them to take part in the activities?
16. What are the actual needs of women participants?
17. How does this programme meet their needs?
18. What attitudes do women have when participating in the programme?
19. What benefits could women gain from the programme?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Any other benefits, including having more understanding about their own situation and thus feeling higher self-esteem as well as having more understanding about “the personal is political” and thus gaining stronger political power?
20. What obstacles do women encounter during participation?
21. How do the responsible organizers help women overcome such obstacles?

2.2. About Computer Course, Domestic Helper Advanced Course and Haircut Skills Basic Training

22. Under what background is these programmes introduced by WWA?
23. What are the objectives of them?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Any other aims, including the aims of enhancing women’s actual personal power (work skills) as well as self-esteem and self-efficacy?
24. What activities have women joined within these programmes?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Anything else, including learning skills favorable for their work?
25. How are women encouraged to join such activities?
26. What are the obstacles to encouraging them to take part in the activities?
27. What are the actual needs of women participants?
28. How do these programmes meet their needs?
29. What attitudes do women have when participating in these programmes?
30. What benefits could women gain from these programmes?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Any other benefits, including having more skills for work and higher self-esteem and self-efficacy?
31. What obstacles do women encounter during participation?
32. How do the responsible organizers help women overcome such obstacles?

2.3. About Women’s Printing Co-op, Women’s Concentric Co-op and Women’s Bottle Recycling Co-op

33. Under what background is these programmes introduced by WWA?
34. What are the objectives of them?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Any other aims, including the aims of enhancing women’s collectivity, actual personal power (work skills) as well as self-esteem and self-efficacy?
35. What activities have women joined within these programmes?
36. How are women encouraged to join such activities?
   - Probing question: (If not mention)
   Anything else, including learning skills favorable for your work, interpersonal skills (i.e.,
   mutual-aid and problem-tackling)?
37. What are the obstacles to encouraging them to take part in the activities?
38. What are the actual needs of women participants?
39. How do these programmes meet their needs?
40. What attitudes do women have when participating in these programmes?
41. What benefits could women gain from these programmes?
   - Probing question: (If not mention)
   Any other benefits, including having stronger collective awareness, more skills for work and
   higher self-esteem and self-efficacy?
42. What obstacles do women encounter during participation?
43. How do the responsible organizers help women overcome such obstacles?

2.4. About Training Course arranged by Trade Union for Cleaners
44. Under what background is this programme introduced by WWA?
45. What are the objectives of it?
   - Probing question: (If not mention)
   Any other aims, including the aims of enhancing women’s political power?
46. What activities have women joined within the programme?
   - Probing question: (If not mention)
   Anything else, including learning skills for social change (i.e., mobilizing and organizing
   skills)?
47. How are women encouraged to join such activities?
48. What are the obstacles to encouraging them to take part in the activities?
49. What are the actual needs of women participants?
50. How does this programme meet their needs?
51. What attitudes do women have when participating in the programme?
52. What benefits could women gain from the programme?
   - Probing question: (If not mention)
   Any other benefits, including having more skills for social change?
53. What obstacles do women encounter during participation?
54. How do the responsible organizers help women overcome such obstacles?
Part C: Particulars

55. Position in WWA
56. Educational attainment
57. Age
58. Occupation besides working in WWA
Appendix II: In-depth interview guide for WWA’ s participants

Part A: General Questions

1. How may I call you?
2. When and why did you join WWA?
3. What programmes have you taken part in?
4. When did you join these programmes and how was your employment conditions at the time of joining them?
5. What activities have you joined within these programme?
6. How were your actual needs met by these programmes?
7. How did familial burden constraint you from participating in such programmes?
8. How was this familial constraint overcome?
9. What benefits have you gained from the programmes?
10. Overall, what changes have you experienced in the process of participating in the programme?

Part B: Specific Questions

2.1. About Bauhinia Group – Middle-aged Women Development Scheme

11. When did you join this programme?
12. How was your employment condition at the time of joining the programme?
13. Why did you join the programme?
14. What activities have you involved in this programme?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Anything else, including expressing your own feelings, sharing common experiences with other participants and discuss the impacts of social pressure/discrimination on single middle-aged women?
15. How were your needs met by the programme?
16. What are the obstacles to taking part in the programme by family burden?
17. How was this familial constraint overcome?
18. What have you benefited from these activities?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
Any other benefits, including having more understanding about their own situation and thus feeling higher self-esteem as well as having more understanding about “the personal is political” and thus gaining stronger political power?
19. How is your employment condition after participating in this programme?
20. What changes have you experienced in the process of participating in the programme?
APPENDICES

2.2. About Computer Course, Domestic Helper Advanced Course and Haircut Skills Basic Training

21. When did you join this programme?
22. How was your employment condition at the time of joining the programme?
23. Why did you join the programme?
24. What activities have you involved in this programme?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
   Anything else, including learning skills favorable for your work?
25. How were your needs met by the programme?
26. What are the obstacles to taking part in the programme by family burden?
27. How was this familial constraint overcome?
28. What have you benefited from these activities?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
   Any other benefits, including having more skills for work and higher self-esteem and self-efficacy?
29. How is your employment condition after participating in this programme?
30. What changes have you experienced in the process of participating in the programme?

2.3. About Women’s Printing Co-op, Women’s Concentric Co-op and Women’s Bottle Recycling Co-op

31. When did you join this programme?
32. How was your employment condition at the time of joining the programme?
33. Why did you join the programme?
34. What activities have you involved in this programme?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
   Anything else, including learning skills favorable for your work, interpersonal skills (i.e., mutual-aid and problem-tackling)?
35. How were your needs met by the programme?
36. What are the obstacles to taking part in the programme by family burden?
37. How was this familial constraint overcome?
38. What have you benefited from these activities?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
   Any other benefits, including having stronger collective awareness, more skills for work and higher self-esteem and self-efficacy?
39. How is your employment condition after participating in this programme?
40. What changes have you experienced in the process of participating in the programme?

2.4. About Training Course arranged by Trade Union for Cleaners

41. When did you join this programme?
42. How was your employment condition at the time of joining the programme?
43. Why did you join the programme?
44. What activities have you involved in this programme?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
      Anything else, including learning skills for social change (i.e., mobilizing and organizing skills)?
45. How were your needs met by the programme?
46. What are the obstacles to taking part in the programme by family burden?
47. How was this familial constraint overcome?
48. What have you benefited from these activities?
   ➢ Probing question: (If not mention)
49. Any other benefits, including having more skills for social change?
50. How is your employment condition after participating in this programme?
51. What changes have you experienced in the process of participating in the programme?

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Part C: Particulars

52. Marriage status
53. Age
54. Educational attainment
55. Current occupation
56. Number of child(ren)