

LCQ20: Unleashing female labour force

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (January 15):

Question:

There are views pointing out that in order to meet the manpower demands of Hong Kong's current and future ageing society, unleashing female labour force is one of the solutions. However, it has been reported that some women in Hong Kong have not joined the workforce due to the need to juggle work and family responsibilities and the stress caused by, among others, the lack of adequate child care services as well as the absence of flexible working hours arrangements and family-friendly working environment/measures in the workplace. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of service recipients, places utilised and utilisation rates of the child-minding services of aided child care centres, After School Care Programme for Pre-primary Children, After School Care Programme for Primary School Students and Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project in various districts in the previous year;

(2) whether the Government will explore conducting a comprehensive review on the policies on women (including employment, health, marriage and sexual harassment), as well as formulating a blueprint for women's development in Hong Kong, so as to ensure that women enjoy equal rights in the political, economic, cultural, social, familial spheres, etc., and set quantitative objectives for raising the labour force participation rate for females, thereby motivating more women to join the workforce; if so, of the details and the timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) of the Government's plans in place to step up the promotion of family-friendly employment practices, such as drawing reference from the Mainland's experience and implementing the "mother post" employment mode, offering tax incentives to enterprises to encourage them to implement more family-friendly measures, and taking the lead in setting up child care facilities in the workplaces of government personnel, so as to facilitate the entry of women with caring burden into the workforce; and

(4) whether it will organise more job fairs, training exhibitions, job referral services, etc. targeting at female job seekers, and set up an additional dedicated webpage on job vacancies for women on the Labour Department's Interactive Employment Service website, so as to assist women in re-entering the workforce?

Reply:

President,

The Government attaches great importance to women's contributions to the society, and supports and promotes women employment from various aspects (including training, employment services and child care services). The Government also encourages employers to adopt good human resource management practices to create an environment conducive to women's participation in the employment market.

In response to the Member's question and after consulting the Home and Youth Affairs Bureau, Civil Service Bureau, Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, a consolidated reply is provided as follows:

(1) The Government has been supporting parents who cannot take care of their children temporarily through subsidising non-government organisations to provide a variety of day child care services, including Child Care Centres (CCCs), the After School Care Programme (ASCP) and the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP). To strengthen support for working families in childbearing, the Government has announced the setting up of additional 11 aided standalone CCCs in phases, doubling the total number of service places to reach around 2 000. The Government is extending the After School Care Programme for Pre-primary Children (ASCP(PC)) to cover all districts in phases, and increasing the number of service places under NSCCP to 2 500 with the estimated number of beneficiaries increasing to 25 000. The Social Welfare Department also provides information and assistance to private organisations applying for registration to operate CCCs to encourage their provision of child care support for their employees.

In 2023-24, the information on the aided CCCs (including aided standalone CCCs and aided CCCs attached to Kindergartens), ASCP(PC), ASCP and Enhanced ASCP for primary students, as well as NSCCP is set out at Annex 1 to Annex 3 respectively.

The Government launched the School-based After School Care Service Scheme in the 2023/24 school year to provide focused support for students in need (particularly those from single-parent families) to stay at school after school hours for care and learning support, thereby allowing their parents to take up jobs. The Scheme was implemented at 59 primary schools located at seven districts with more targeted students in the first year. Related information is set out at Annex 4.

(2) The Government has all along upheld the principles and provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in promoting women's development and advancement in all fields. The Home and Youth Affairs Bureau (HYAB), in collaboration with the Women's Commission and the community as a whole, will continue to promote the well-being and interests of women through a three-pronged strategy, namely the provision of an enabling environment, empowerment of women and public education. The HYAB implemented a series of new initiatives in relation to women's development last year, including setting up on April 1 a dedicated Women Affairs Team and designating the post of Commissioner for Women Affairs; launching a one-stop family and women information portal and implementing the Maintenance

Mediation Pilot Scheme through the Community Care Fund. Besides, the HYAB organised the first Family and Women Development Summit last October which provided a platform for individuals who are concerned about women's development to explore collectively on areas of interest related to women's development and the strategies for promoting women's development. To promote women's workplace development, the HYAB will also launch the "She Inspires" mentorship programme in the first half of 2025. The programme will match local female university students who aspire to pursue a career in the professional or business sectors with senior management mentors, and provide related training and activities in order to nurture the future strength that "hold up half the sky". Bureaux and departments have all along been working closely to provide necessary assistance to individuals, including women, under their respective purviews. The Government will continue to promote women's development through various initiatives and will continue to assess the need for formulating a "Blueprint for Women's Development in Hong Kong".

(3) The HYAB has been supporting the work of the Family Council in promoting a culture of loving families, as well as encouraging the wider adoption of more diversified and flexible family-friendly employment practices (FFEPs) in the community. These measures will also help encourage women to rejoin the workforce. Since 2023-24, the Family Council has launched the promotional videos entitled "Family-friendly Workplace", which featured various FFEPs adopted by local companies and sharings by employers and employees. FFEPs introduced in the videos include work-from-home arrangement, flexible work hours and allowing employees to bring their children to work during summer vacation. The Family Council has also collaborated with the Radio Television Hong Kong to launch radio programmes to promulgate different FFEPs. The Family Council will continue the relevant promotion work.

The Labour Department (LD) encourages employers, having regard to their individual circumstances, to adopt FFEPs, including flexible work arrangements, additional leave benefit to cater for family needs and offering living support, to assist employees (including women) in balancing their work and daily needs. The LD will continue to organise publicity activities, including the Good Employer Charter, to strengthen the promotion of related measures to employers.

As a good employer, the Government has all along been committed to creating a family-friendly working environment for staff, enabling them to cope with both work and family commitments. The family-friendly employment measures provided by the Government include, among others, the five-day week initiative, maternity leave and paternity leave that are more favourable than the statutory requirements, and the implementation of a breastfeeding-friendly workplace. In order to further exemplify the Government's commitment as a caring employer, following the introduction of marriage leave and compassionate leave from April 2024 onwards, the Government announced in the 2024 Policy Address the introduction of childcare leave and enhancements to the special work arrangements on festivals or their eves.

Under the principle of striking a balance between the needs of employees and prudent use of public money, the Government will continue to endeavour to

provide its staff with a family-friendly working environment through keeping the current arrangements under review from time to time and listening to the views and suggestions of the staff side and other stakeholders. In respect of the proposal in relation to tax concessions, the Government must ensure that a balance is struck between promoting relevant policy objectives and exercising fiscal prudence, especially at a time when the Government's fiscal deficit is high.

(4) The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) provides around 700 market-oriented training courses straddling 28 industries and generic skills for eligible persons, including women, to assist them in joining or re-joining the labour market. To cater for the needs of women with family commitments, ERB provides flexible arrangements such as the Modular Certificates Accumulation Scheme and the "Hire and Train" Scheme to enable trainees to arrange their study and work schedule flexibly. ERB's "Smart Living" and "Smart Baby Care" Schemes provide free job matching and referral services for graduates, mostly women, of training courses in domestic and post-natal care services.

The LD provides diversified employment services to job seekers (including women) through various channels, including job centres, industry-based recruitment centres, the Telephone Employment Service Centre, the Interactive Employment Service (iES) website (www.jobs.gov.hk) and its mobile application. The iES website features various dedicated webpages, e.g. Dedicated Webpage on Part-time Job Vacancies, dedicated webpages on retail industry and catering industry vacancies, etc., providing relevant employment information. The LD also liaises with employers of different industries to canvass vacancies suitable for job-seekers with different educational attainments and work experience, and stages district-based and thematic job fairs from time to time to facilitate job seekers (including women) to apply for the vacancies.

To further promote the employment of older and middle-aged persons, the LD launched the three-year Re-employment Allowance Pilot Scheme (REA Scheme) on July 15, 2024 to encourage persons aged 40 or above who have not been at paid employment for three consecutive months or more to join the employment market. The REA Scheme covers full-time jobs, part-time jobs and qualified "casual work" promoting flexible employment for women. To encourage employers to take on participants of the REA Scheme, the LD has also uniformly extended the durations of on-the-job training under the Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged for employers engaging REA Scheme participants.

The Government will continue to provide support and carry out promotion work to help unleash the female labour force.