

LegCo Secretariat releases Research Brief on “Opportunities and challenges facing maternal workforce in Hong Kong”

The following is issued on behalf of the Legislative Council Secretariat:

The Legislative Council Secretariat (the Secretariat) today (July 16) released a Research Brief on "Opportunities and challenges facing maternal workforce in Hong Kong".

Between 1997 and 2018, labour force in Hong Kong has gone up by a total of 567 000 to 3.66 million. Females take up nine-tenths of incremental growth in labour force, significantly lifting the proportion of females in total workforce from 37 per cent to 45 per cent. The additional female workforce has replenished the manpower gap upon progressive retirement of ageing male workforce and enlarged its contribution to the local economy.

While work participation rate of women at prime working age of 25-54 leaped from 59.7 per cent to 72.7 per cent in 21 years, some 458 000 of females at prime age were not working in 2018 and amongst them, about four-fifths were held back by housework and childcare responsibilities. Incentivizing women to work could mitigate the downward pressure on manpower supply, improve the livelihood of grassroots families and promote social mobility.

However, there are persistent concerns that inadequate policy support to local working mothers is restraining female employment. Work participation of younger mothers aged 25-39 has receded during 2007-2018, partly because childcare services are highly inadequate. Moreover, childcare services cannot entirely meet user requirements due to their short caring hours, low affordability and location mismatch. Overseas experience suggests that accessible childcare services are one of the "most effective ways to tackle barriers to female employment". Despite a few policy pledges to enhance childcare services made in the 2019-20 Budget, the Government is facing land constraints that result in long implementation time for some of the services.

Rigid workplace arrangements also held back mothers from work. At least 50 000 homemakers aged 30-59 indicated their willingness to work if "suitable jobs" with conditions such as flexible working hours come up. Although the Government has been promoting family-friendly employment practices, it is largely a voluntary campaign and feedback from employers is reportedly rather lukewarm. Meanwhile, there are complaints about "motherhood penalty" in face of implicit discrimination on the grounds of family status at the workplace.

The subjects of women employment and childcare services fall within the policy areas of the Legislative Council (LegCo) Panel on Manpower and the

LegCo Panel on Welfare Services.

The Research Brief is prepared by the Secretariat's Research Office of the Information Services Division with a view to enhancing information support for Members. It is a concise summary aiming at explaining a subject matter which may be of interest to Members and the general public.

The Research Brief is now available on the LegCo Website at www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/1819rb02-opportunities-and-challenges-facing-maternal-workforce-in-hong-kong-20190716-e.pdf.