

## Fisherwomen

Economic autonomy is integral to women's development. On top of their role as caretaker at home, women have also contributed to household income through gainful employment. Before the 1960s, the fishing and agricultural industries were the main areas of economic participation by women.

Take the fishing industry as an example. Usually men would go to the sea for fishing, whereas women would stay home to take care of the children and elders in the family. Women would also help catching shrimps to make shrimp paste, catching loaches, selling fruits on sampans and collecting bread's crust on shore. To make ends meet, some women in Tai O carried visitors in a sedan chair known as 'Shan Dou'. In the 1970s, as a result of social changes, many former fisherwomen started to work in factories.

Under the influence of patriarchal values, women in earlier times, whether living on boat or on shore, were not given due recognition in the family and generally deprived of any right to estates. As fishing was a labour intensive industry, and because of the high mortality rate of their children succumbed to diseases or fatal accidents as a result of the poor living conditions, women in fishing families were always required to bear as many children as they possibly could and had no autonomy in the question of child bearing.



## Farming Women

In the early days, women in the New Territories villages were both housekeepers and breadwinners. They needed to sow, transplant rice seedlings and keep poultry in order to earn an income.

Take Hakka women as an example. In addition to household chores like cooking, weeding, chopping firewood and sewing, they had to work on the field and take care of farm-related matters. They were indeed playing the dual roles of homemaker and labourer.



The rapid urbanisation in Hong Kong has brought in a large number of public and private housing as well as industrial estates in the New Territories, leading to a shrinkage of farm land. From the 1970s onward, this, coupled with the economic restructuring, has driven many farming women from the villages to work in factories.



## Domestic Helpers

In the early days, employment choices were very limited and many women chose to work as domestic helpers. In particular, during the mid-twentieth century, a large number of merchants and entrepreneurs from the mainland of China had immigrated to Hong Kong and most of them had employed female domestic helpers to take care of their household chores and routines. Junior female helpers new to the trade were commonly called 'Chu Nian Mei' (Maid) while the more experienced ones were known as 'Ma Jie' (Amah) or 'Guan Jia' (Housekeeper).



Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Government Records Service

Most of the 'Ma Jie' were single women from the Shunde County of Guangdong. Shunde was then a place renowned for its vibrancy of sericulture. The sericulture trade offered ample employment opportunities for women and enabled them to attain economic independence. Influenced by the impression that many married women were often badly treated by their husbands and parents-in-law, a good number of these women in Shunde chose to remain single for life. They were commonly known as 'Zi Shu Nu' (literally meaning a woman who dressed her own hair). When Shunde's sericultural industry later fell into decline, some of these women decided to relocate to Hong Kong and worked as domestic helpers.



Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Government Records Service

'Ma Jie' were marked by their usual attire of snow-white blouse and black trousers. They wore their hair in a plait or bun. Those who had worked for a long period of time and won the trust of their employers would be promoted to 'Guan Jia' (Housekeepers). In the 1950s and 60s, 'Ma Jie' and 'Guan Jia' were sought-after jobs, but today the trade has faded into history in Hong Kong. Taking their places are local domestic helpers and foreign domestic helpers from overseas such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand.



A 'Ma Jie' taking care of her employer's three children  
Source: Donated by Ms. CHEUNG Yuet-oi



Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Government Records Service

## Female Factory Workers [1]

Textile industry spearheaded the industrial development in Hong Kong. In the 1950s, many Shanghai entrepreneurs relocated to Hong Kong, bringing with them capital and skills, and started building spinning mills here. This generated a huge demand for low-skilled workers, which in turn set the stage for women to shift from working as maids to "blue collar" and "white collar" jobs.

"Blue collar" is a general term to describe factory workers. Industrial development in Hong Kong boomed in the 1960s and 70s, during which factories mushroomed. Many of them were engaged in the production of apparel, electronic spare parts and toys for export. In the heyday of industrial development, the number of women workers was nearly double that of men. Women workers, taking lunch pails to work, thronged the factory districts in the morning.



Factory workers knitting woolen sweaters  
Source: Information Services Department



Old ladies cutting loose threads in a factory  
Source: Information Services Department

There was no universal education then and the traditional thinking in favour of boys over girls still prevailed. Many parents were unwilling to spare money for their daughters' education in those times of privation. Young girls were instead made to work in factories to support their families and support their brothers to go to school.



Seamstresses at work in a factory  
Source: Information Services Department



A factory worker knitting woolen gloves  
Source: Donated by Ms. TANG Lai-wah

## Female Factory Workers [2]

Following the textile industry, there came other manufacturing industries such as garments, plastics, electronics, toys, watches and clocks as well as wigs and they became the principal employers of female workers. Take the plastics industry as an example. Riding on the booming demand for plastic flowers after the Second World War, which fueled a continual growth of export of plastic flowers in Hong Kong, the plastic flowers industry became the territory's third largest industry in the 1960s. As for the electronics sector, it sprouted in the 1950s and thrived to become the second largest industry next only to textiles in the 1970s.

Amongst these industries, female workers in the wig industry were the best paid. Under the influence of the prevalent western fashion, women liked to wear their hair in a beehive whilst men sported the Beatles' hairstyle. The fashion triggered a huge demand for wigs. In 1966, the number of hair product factories multiplied dramatically from less than 20 to over 400. But the supply of wigs still could not keep pace with the demand, which in turn boosted the wages of women workers in the industry. By the late 1970s, wigs fell out of fashion and many women workers left wig factories and turned to other lines of work.



Factory workers stringing beads  
Source: Information Services Department



Factory workers making curly wigs  
Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Government Records Service



Factory workers making plastic toy cars  
Source: Information Services Department

By the 1980s, Hong Kong began to undergo economic restructuring while the Mainland launched its reform and open-door policy. Most of the manufacturers started to relocate their factories to the Mainland, marking the decline of the garment industry and other light industries in Hong Kong. Many female factory workers were forced out of job and some of them received job retraining to switch to other fields.



Factory workers making plastic flowers  
Source: Information Services Department



Factory workers making plastic dolls in the 1970s  
Source: Information Services Department

# Female Labour and Economic Autonomy

## Women at Work

### Healthcare



Ah Kwoi, the first female student nurse at Nethersole Hospital. She was also the first student nurse in South China. (1993)  
Source: Donated by Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital

In the early days, women in the healthcare sector were primarily serving as nurses. In 1893, the Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital commenced its nurse training programme. Then other hospitals, such as Tung Wah Hospital, followed suit and founded their nursing schools. These nursing schools had been run by the hospitals until 1999 when the Hong Kong Hospital Authority decided to close all such nursing schools operated by the hospitals. Since then, nurse training was offered by the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. For more than a century, the nursing schools had trained many professional healthcare workers and most of them were women. Though in recent years there are more men joining the nursing profession, women still constitute the majority in the profession. According to the Department of Health, the gender ratio for registered nurses remained at 11 to 14 men per every 100 women in the years between 1987 and 2006.



Dr. Sibree, Mrs. Stewart and nurses (1906)  
Source: Donated by Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital



Mrs. Wu Ting-fang (Ms. Ho Miu-ling) presented certificates (1929)  
Source: Donated by Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital



Nursing students having class in wards  
Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Government Records Service

In contrast, men remain the majority in the medical profession. But women doctors have grown steadily in recent years both in terms of the number and ratio. In 2006, there were 3,114 women among the 11,739 registered doctors. Over the past few years, the number of female medical undergraduates has outnumbered their male counterparts. This should bring about positive changes to the gender ratio disparity and the gender divide in the medical profession in future.



Nursing students practicing bandaging  
Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Government Records Service



Nursing students in class studying the human body  
Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Government Records Service

## Women at Work

### Teachers

In the early days, most of the educated women aspired to join the teaching profession. They could undertake in-service training and become teachers. In Hong Kong, teacher training could be dated back to 1853 when the first teacher training course was offered by the St. Paul's College. To give impetus to the development, the Hong Kong Government founded the Northcote College of Education in 1939. This was followed by the establishment of the Grantham College of Education (1951), the Sir Robert Black College of Education (1960), the Hong Kong Technical Teachers' College (1974) and the Institute of Language in Education (1982) to provide teacher training programmes. In 1995, the Hong Kong Institute of Education was established to replace these colleges of education and became the sole tertiary institution providing teacher training in Hong Kong.



Photo of teacher with students (1968)  
Source: Donated by Ms. SO Dan-wan



A kindergarten graduation photo (1969)  
Source: Donated by Ms. SO Dan-wan



A photo of teachers  
Source: Donated by Mrs. LAU LAU Suk-ming

Today, in primary and secondary schools, female teachers outnumber their male counterparts but the majority of the school principals are men. In tertiary institutions, the number and ratio of women in the teaching staff rose steadily in recent years, from 27.4% in 1996 to 32.4% in 2006.

## Women at Work

### Clerks and Executives

By the 1960s, Hong Kong had already established itself as an entrepot, and trading firms of various sizes in import and export businesses mushroomed. At that time, the emerging "white collar" jobs were most sought after by many young people. "White collar" is a general term to describe non-manual professions, such as clerk, cashier and secretary. Back



Source: Information Services Department

then, many parents encouraged their children to hone their English in order to secure a job in the trading firms. By the 1970s, females had better access to education with the introduction of universal education. Coupled with the huge number of clerical posts generated by the industrial and commercial developments, there was growing number of women taking up white collar jobs and moving up to managerial ranks. At present, it is not uncommon for women to be directors, presidents and senior executives in various trades and professions. The number of female managers and executives has grown from 40,300 in 1993 to 99,600 in 2006, while the number of male managers and executives has also increased from 211,400 to 242,100 during the same period.

### Entrepreneurs

Over the past two decades, the number of female entrepreneurs in Hong Kong has also been on the rise. Previous research reports indicated that the rank of female entrepreneurs increased steadily between 1981 and 1991, with the most notable growth recorded in the manufacturing sector.



## Women at Work

As a result of the economic, educational and social developments in Hong Kong, women have become active participants in a wide range of trades and professions since the 1980s, and their number has been rising steadily. Today, many women are employed in hitherto male-dominant professions, such as judges, police officers, fire fighters, pilots, factory managers, bus drivers, security guards, etc. That represents a notable diversification in the career choices of women.

### Judges and Lawyers

The number of women engaged in the legal profession has been rising steadily. In 2007, Hong Kong has 36 female judges, accounting for 22% of the bench. Besides, the ratio of female solicitors holding practising certificates has grown from 34% of the total in 1997 to 43% in 2007, whereas that of female barristers has also gone up from 18% of the total in 1997 to 26% in 2007.

### Accountants

In 2007, women constitute nearly half of the total number of accountants in Hong Kong, at 46%.

### Engineers

Up to 2007, there are a total of 11,726 fully qualified engineers, among which, 4.7% are women. Besides, according to a survey on female employment, women took up nearly 30% of the posts in the sectors of "engineering/ construction/product/and business studies or development" and "information technology/information systems support" and also a quarter of the senior managerial positions.

### Registered Social Workers

Women constitute the majority in the social work sector. In 2007, there are 9,347 female registered social workers, or 72% of the total.

## Women at Work



Source: Fire Services Department

### Police Officers and Fire Fighters

The Hong Kong Police Force started to recruit female police officers in 1949. As at 2007, there are 3,144 female police officers, including 5 female Chief Superintendents and 26 female Superintendents. In 1995, the Hong Kong Police Force introduced the scheme of armed women police officers. Armed women police officers could be deployed to a wider range of posts including the Police Tactical Unit, thus enabling female officers to have access to a wider scope of duties to fully develop their potential.

The Hong Kong Fire Brigade, established 125 years ago, started to recruit women in 1993. As at 2007, there are five female Senior Station Officers in the Hong Kong Fire Services Department.

### Conclusion

As a result of the rapid developments in the society of Hong Kong, women's access to education and employment has been significantly improved. This not only enables them to give full rein to their abilities in the professions according to their own aspirations, but also provides for the optimal utilisation of human resources beneficial to the long-term development of our society.



Source: Fire Services Department



The photos were taken in 1960s  
Source: Public Records Office of Hong Kong Government Records Service

