

Hong Kong 'should learn from Singapore' on childcare: Hong Kong minister ^[1]

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Hong Kong must improve public childcare service so more mothers can go to work and help ease the city's impending manpower shortage, the labour minister said on Sunday (March 18).

Secretary for Labour and Welfare Dr Law Chi-kwong said making the services more accessible was a matter of gender equality, and an area in which Hong Kong could learn from Singapore.

Dr Law said getting more people into work would ease the effects of a workforce shrinkage which is expected to kick in in the next few years.

The government estimated that the size of the labour force would peak at 3.68 million in 2021, and start to decrease in 2022 as the population ages.

The comparable figure for 2017 was 3.64 million. Neither figure takes into account the city's hundreds of thousands of foreign domestic helpers.

Writing his weekly blog on Sunday, Dr Law said that over the past two decades women in Hong Kong had become better educated and taken up more managerial positions, as their share of the labour force grew.

"In 2016, 33 per cent of management jobs in Hong Kong were held by women, much higher than the 13 per cent in 1996 ... We also have a female chief executive in Hong Kong," he wrote, in a reference to his boss, the city's leader Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor.

Dr Law noted that women's labour force participation rate was 54.8 per cent in 2016, still 13.8 percentage points below that of men, which was 68.6 per cent.

In 2017, retirement was the main reason why men aged 15 or above were economically inactive, with 61 per cent stating it as the reason for not working. But among inactive women, being tied up with household duties was the prime reason, with 39.8 per cent, or 635,600 women, saying that was their reason for not having a job.

Dr Law also noted that as women age, their rate of participating in the workforce decreases.

For instance, in 2001, 86.8 per cent of women aged 25 to 29 were working, but five years later, only 78.9 per cent of the same group of women, aged 30 to 34, were at work.

The minister said childbirth was the main reason behind that decrease.

He said the city could learn from the approach of Singapore, which had managed to mitigate the trend by improving public childcare.

Last year, Singapore introduced a new law giving the authorities more power to ensure that preschools meet official standards.

In 2015, the city state's Early Childhood Development Agency appointed a group of partner operators under a new scheme to keep fees low and improve the quality of programmes at childcare centres.

Dr Law said improving childcare would allow more parents to choose between looking after their children and working.

"We will make an effort in finding the right venues and fighting for more resources, and our goal is to increase the number of childcare places," he said.

"We cannot ... ignore the price that women have been paying because of childcare. Improving childcare is not only to satisfy labour needs, it is also to comply with the principle of gender equality."

In her policy address in October, Dr Lam promised to provide about 300 additional places in childcare centres across North district, Kwun Tong, Kwai Tsing and Sha Tin from 2018-19.

Welfare sector legislator Shiu Ka-chun said as the city's unemployment rate was only 2.9 per cent, encouraging more women to work was more of an anti-poverty issue.

"A lot of women are suffering in poverty because they have to stay home to take care of children and can not accumulate wealth for themselves," he said.

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