

## Hong Kong Seeks More Women Workers as Aging Population Looms

By Rachel Evans and Fion Li Nov 7, 2013 9:28 AM GMT+0800



Photographer: Brent Lewin/Bloomberg

*Pedestrians walk through a market in Hong Kong.*

Hong Kong is seeking to attract more homemakers into the workforce as an aging population and low fertility rates threaten to curb economic growth.

More than half a million women homemakers in the city are between the ages of 30 and 59, representing a “huge potential,” Florence Hui, the undersecretary for home affairs, said late yesterday at a Bloomberg seminar in Hong Kong.

Female labor-force participation in Hong Kong has stalled at under 50 percent in the past decade as inadequate childcare services and rigid working hours held

back workers. With the elderly expected to make up 30 percent of the population by 2041, the government wants more women to join the workforce.

“The aging population and the low fertility rate are giving rise to a population deficit which means that we have to make it possible for women to go and participate,” Anna Wu, chairman of the Hong Kong Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority, said in an interview yesterday.

The Asia-Pacific region loses about \$89 billion a year in unrealized output by excluding women from parts of the economy, according to the United Nations. Fifty-seven percent of Hong Kong employers are having trouble finding the right staff, the most since 2008, according to a report by ManpowerGroup.



Photographer: Jerome Favre/Bloomberg

*A woman buys fruit at a market in the Yau Ma Tei district of Hong Kong. Women labor... [Read More](#)*

Attracting more women into the labor force would be crucial as Hong Kong edges to a demographic turning point where its workforce will shrink.

## **Labor Shortfall**

Hong Kong will have a shortfall of 14,000 workers in 2018, assuming the city's economy expands at 4 percent a year, the Census and Statistics Department said last year. With a higher growth rate, the [deficit](#) could reach 163,800 employees.

"We do see very positive financial implications" in having more women workers, Hui said. "A key area we look at is how to unleash the potential of women into the workforce."

Women labor participation rates in Hong Kong rose to 49.6 percent in 2012, edging up from 48.6 percent in 2002. That's lagging behind Singapore, where it has advanced to 57.7 percent in 2012, from 50.6 percent a decade ago, as the government offered larger tax breaks to working mothers.

"Because we don't have enough affordable and accessible childcare, that is a constraint on women advancing," said Su-Mei Thompson, chief executive officer at The Women's Foundation in Hong Kong, a non-profit organization.

Women disproportionately work in less-skilled roles, such as cleaners, caterers, or cashiers, as these offer greater flexibility on working hours, Thompson said.



Photographer: Lam Yik Fei/Bloomberg

*An employee works at a cashier's counter of a ParknShop Superstore supermarket in Hong Kong.*

About 100,000 women are working part-time in Hong Kong, twice the number of men, Hui said.

The proportion of people aged 65 and older will account for 30 percent by 2041, up from 14 percent last year, Financial Secretary John Tsang said in February. The number of residents in the workforce is expected to decline to 49.5 percent by 2041, from 58.8 percent in 2012, according to the government.

Only a significant increase in productivity could offset the negative impact of a smaller workforce on growth, the government wrote in a recent consultation paper.

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