



Research Office
Legislative Council Secretariat

Information Note

Policy measures to expand female workforce in Australia and Singapore

IN03/2023

1. Introduction

1.1 In spite of steady improvement in recent decades, the work propensity of women in Hong Kong in terms of the labour force participation rate (“LFPR”) for those in the prime working age group of 25-54 was just 72.7% in 2021, far below the corresponding figure of 93.4% for men.¹ To replenish an expanding cohort of retired workers amidst rapid ageing in the local population, the Government has launched a few more initiatives to boost female employment since 2018, such as extending statutory maternity leave by four weeks to 14 weeks and increasing provision of aided child care by up to 1 900 places in the medium term. Yet the boosting effect is rather limited so far. Most recently, the need to expand female workforce has become even more imperative, as labour force shrank by 227 500 or 6.2% in three years ending mid-2022, induced in part by a net outflow of people during the COVID-19 epidemic. To mitigate shortage of talents and achieve greater gender equality, there is continued advocacy in society to unlock the work potential of economically inactive women. Over the past five years, the subject of female employment has been discussed at the Legislative Council (“LegCo”) on at least 12 occasions.

1.2 At the request of Hon Maggie CHAN Man-ki, the Research Office has studied the policy measures to expand female workforce in Australia and Singapore. These two places in Asia-Pacific are selected for further study because their LFPRs for prime working age women are very high, at 80.4% and 84.7% respectively. Moreover, they are globally acclaimed in terms of policy measures to promote female employment and gender equality.² This *Information Note* begins with recent developments in female employment and pertinent policy issues in Hong Kong, followed by a summary of major policy initiatives across the globe and

¹ All statistics for Hong Kong quoted in this note exclude foreign domestic helpers. In line with the practice of some advanced places, LFPR for the prime working age group of 25-54 is adopted as the work propensity indicator because it can filter out the effects of both youngsters aged 15-24 still in education and older persons aged 55 and above approaching retirement.

² Based on a global ranking of gender equality of 171 places in 2021, Australia and Singapore took high positions at 19th and 7th respectively. Hong Kong was not included in this ranking exercise. See United Nations (2022).

in the Mainland. After that, there will be two sections on policy measures to expand female workforce in Australia and Singapore respectively, along with a table for easy reference (**Appendix**).

2. Recent policy developments in Hong Kong

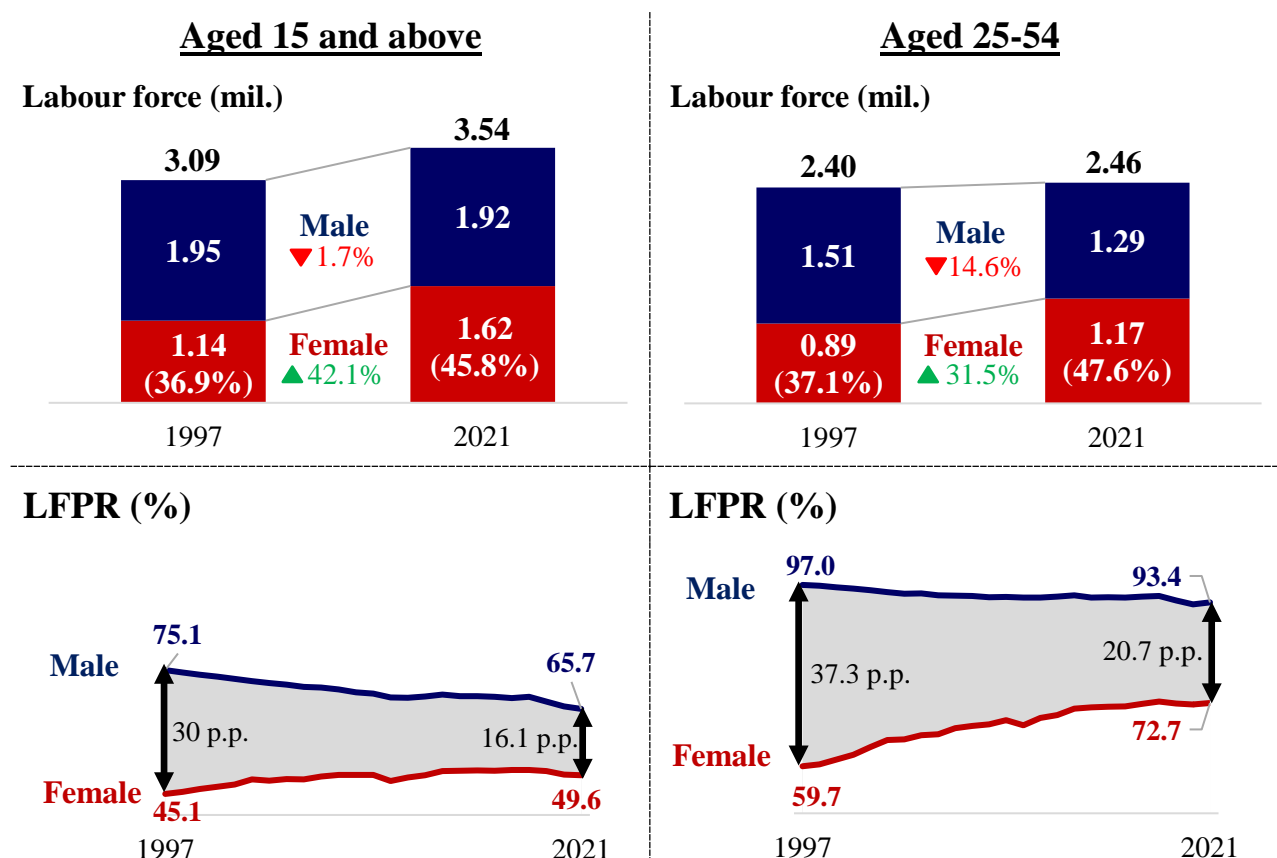
2.1 Between 1997 and 2021, female labour force in Hong Kong surged by 42.1% to reach 1.62 million, mainly on account of continued inflows of One-way Permit (“OWP”) holders and increased job opportunities for women with better education.³ Coupled with the 1.7% decline in the male counterpart due to increasing retirement of older workers, the share of women in the local labour force was enlarged visibly from 36.9% to 45.8% in 24 years (**Figure 1**). More specifically on LFPR for women aged 25-54, it went up significantly from 59.7% to 73.0% between 1997 and 2018, on the back of increased presence of foreign domestic workers (“FDHs”) freeing local women from housework.⁴ Another factor was that more women chose spinsterhood or delayed their marriages and childbearing (paragraph 2.2 below).⁵ Yet the figure eased back marginally to 72.7% in 2021, upon closure of some child care centres and a net outflow of 59 900 FDHs over two years amidst the epidemic. Comparing this against the LFPR for men in the same prime working age band, the gender gap stood at a high level of 20.7 percentage points in 2021, though almost halved from 37.3 percentage points in 1997.

³ The total entry of OWP holders amounted to 1.12 million from 1997 to 2021 and two-thirds (67%) of them were female. For detailed discussion on structural factors shaping the female workforce, please refer to the Research Brief on “Opportunities and challenges facing maternal workforce in Hong Kong”. See Legislative Council Secretariat (2019).

⁴ Between 1997 and 2021, the number of FDHs soared by 98.5% to 339 000. See Census and Statistics Department (2022b).

⁵ Between 1997 and 2021, the median age of women at first marriage increased from 26.8 years old to 30.6 years old, and the figure at first childbirth from 29.0 years old to 32.6 years old.

Figure 1 – Salient statistics on labour force by sex in Hong Kong



Source: Census and Statistics Department (2023).

2.2 To a certain extent, **the above differential in LFPR can be attributed to the traditional division of labour in family duties, especially child care responsibilities.** This is manifested in the pattern of workforce participation of local prime working age women across their life stages, with LFPR hovering at a high level of 90.6% for never-married women in 2021, but falling to 78% among married women without children, and steeply further to only 55.5% for married women with children aged below 15.⁶ Childbirth thus represents a watershed for women’s workforce participation, shortening their career by around one-third against men and precipitating the alleged “motherhood penalty”.⁷ By mid-2022, some 428 800 of local women aged 25-54 were economically inactive, with 80.5% of them citing “engagement in household duties” as the major reason for leaving the workforce.⁸

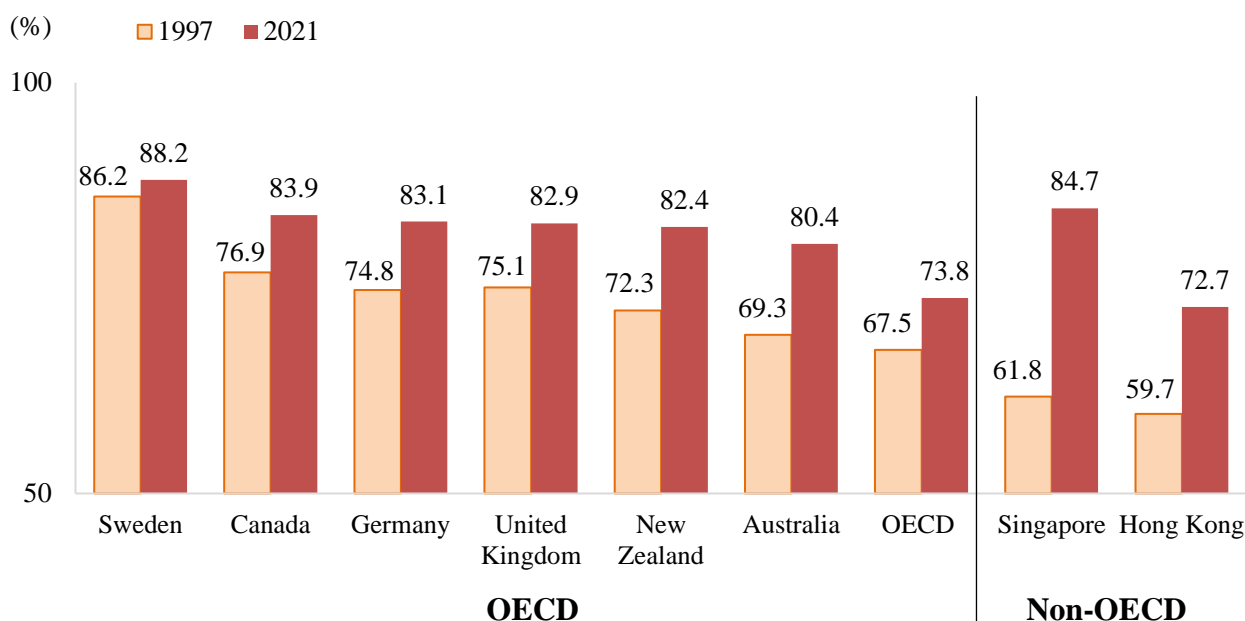
⁶ LFPR for men aged 25-54 was very stable at above 90% throughout their life stages. Based on data provided by the Census and Statistics Department upon request, the pertinent male figure was 91.8% before marriage, rising to 94.9% for those married without children, and further to 95.3% for those married with young children.

⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017).

⁸ Housework includes caring duties for the old and the young.

2.3 While gender-based division of labour is a global phenomenon, policy measures launched by many advanced member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (“OECD”) over the years seem to have raised work propensity of women. Taking 2021 as an example, LFPR for women in prime working age reached 80.4% in Australia, 82.4% in New Zealand, 82.9% in the United Kingdom (“UK”), 83.1% in Germany, 83.9% in Canada and 88.2% in Sweden, noticeably higher than the OECD average of 73.8% (Figure 2). Could LFPR for females in Hong Kong (now close to OECD’s overall level) catch up to these high levels, it would bring **multiple benefits to local society**, such as (a) addressing the labour shortage problem caused by the long-term trend of ageing and the recent outflow of talents;⁹ (b) expanding the productive capacity of the local economy and lifting GDP; and (c) alleviating poverty and improving livelihood of grassroots families through an additional income source from working mothers.¹⁰

Figure 2 – LFPR for females aged 25-54 in selected advanced places



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022a).

⁹ According to the “Manpower Projection to 2027” released by the Government in 2019, the labour force was envisaged to decline by 100 700 or 3% between 2022 and 2027, largely due to ageing population.

¹⁰ In 2020, 90.1% of working poor households (i.e. income below Government’s poverty line) with children had only one earner. See Census and Statistics Department (2021).

2.4 Reportedly, **the largest hurdle against boosting local women employment is the inadequate, unaffordable and inconvenient child care services.** In 2021-2022, although there were 37 100 child care places for children aged under three in Hong Kong (equivalent to 29.9% of the corresponding children population of 124 100), fewer than one quarter were aided financially by the Government.¹¹ Even for the aided services, the median monthly user fee amounted to HK\$5,537 or 20.1% of the median monthly household income, which was considered to be too high by lower-income families.¹² Coupled with other practical limitations (e.g. relatively short opening hours and uneven district distribution), the overall utilization rate of child care services was just 58.3% for aided institutions (and 50.9% for all institutions). Consequently, the actual enrolment rate of child care for infant/young children aged under three was just 15.2% in 2021. *Secondly*, workplace arrangements are still very rigid in Hong Kong, with just 17% of surveyed employers offering family-friendly arrangements (e.g. part-time work, time off and flexible starting and finishing times) to facilitate child care for working mothers, compared with the high figure of 87% in OECD,¹³ thus making it difficult for female workers to balance between their work and family obligations. *Thirdly*, 8% of surveyed employees with family caring responsibilities reported discrimination in the workplace (e.g. in hiring and firing), especially for mothers.¹⁴ *Last but not least*, there are claims of gender wage gap (e.g. women earned 9.5% less than men in terms of full-time median employment earnings in 2021)¹⁵ and glass ceiling in senior positions (e.g. women accounted for just 17.1% of board members of top listed companies in 2022), which dampen work incentives of local women.¹⁶

¹¹ Aided child care services are provided by government-subsidized Child Care Centres (“CCCs”) and those attached to kindergartens. Statistics were provided by Social Welfare Department (“SWD”) and Education Bureau upon request.

¹² The fee refers to whole-day services in aided standalone CCCs.

¹³ Equal Opportunities Commission (2022a) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2016).

¹⁴ Bearing in mind under-reporting, the Equal Opportunities Commission received 389 complaints about sex discrimination in the workplace and 42 complaints about employment-related discrimination due to family status in 2021-2022. See The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2018) and Equal Opportunities Commission (2022b).

¹⁵ The gender gap in median earnings was 12.5% if including part-time workers.

¹⁶ Statistics were compiled from 69 constituent companies of the Hang Seng Index in mid-2022, and the corresponding figure for all 2 600 listed companies was 16.3%. As for female share in managerial-level positions, the figure in Hong Kong was 38.4% in 2021 (somewhat higher than the OECD average of 33.7%), but it should be read with caution as this figure has a broad coverage and includes some junior managerial positions with limited decision-making power. See Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Limited (2022), Community Business (2022) and Census and Statistics Department (2022b).

2.5 **Since 2018, the Government has introduced a number of additional initiatives to unleash the work potential of women.** They include: (a) lengthening paternity leave from three days to five days in January 2019 and maternity leave from 10 weeks to 14 weeks in December 2020; (b) introducing the planning ratio of 100 aided child care places per 25 000 general population in the local planning guideline in March 2020, quadrupling the actual territory-wide ratio of just around 25 in 2018; (c) adding up to 1 900 aided child care places in the medium term;¹⁷ and (d) offering a non-means tested monthly subsidy of up to HK\$600 to parents to alleviate their financial burden in using aided child care services as from February 2020. **However, there are criticisms that these measures are too modest to incentivize more women to work.** For instance, the Government acknowledged that it would take “10 years or more” to meet the enhanced planning ratio for aided child care services, even if it could find enough land in the 18 districts to build such centres. For the pledge of extra 1 900 aided child care places in the medium term, they do not help much as they represent just 1.5% of the children population aged under three. For the HK\$600 monthly subsidy on aided child care services, it represents just around 11% of the median fee.¹⁸

3. Global policy measures to expand female workforce

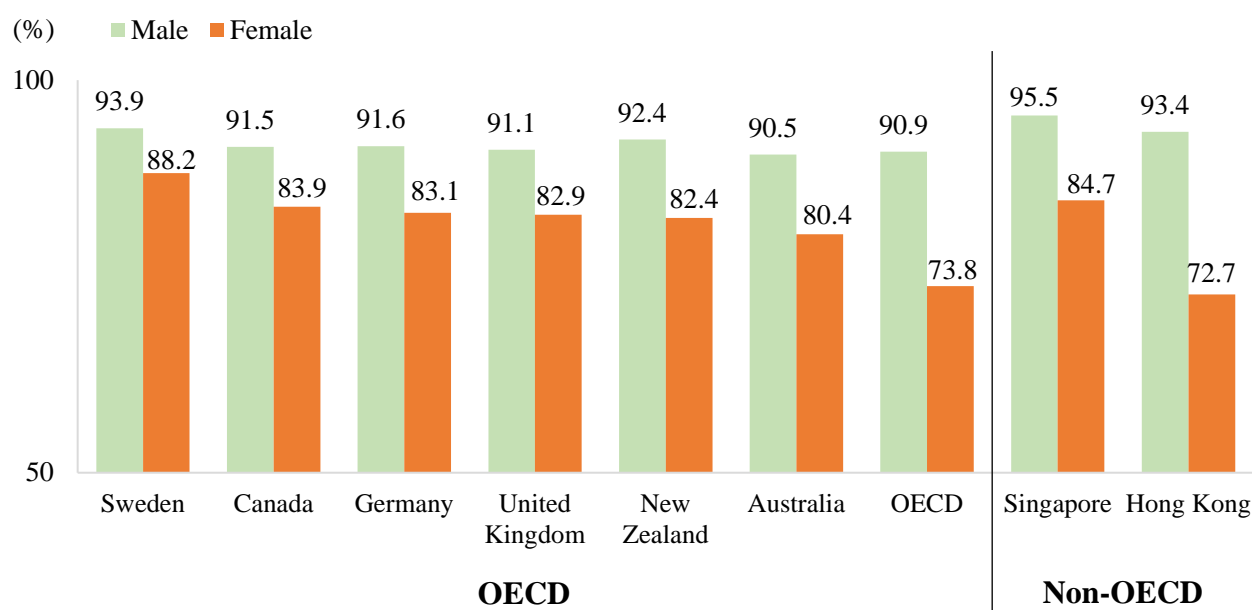
3.1 Globally, gender difference in work propensity exists in OECD, but the gaps in many advanced member states are noticeably smaller. For instance, the gender differentials in LFPR for the prime working age population were in the region of 5.7-10.1 percentage points in Sweden, Canada, Germany, the UK, New Zealand and Australia in 2021, far less than that of 20.7 percentage points in Hong Kong and 17.1% in OECD as a whole (**Figure 3**).¹⁹ The smaller gender gaps could be attributed to early launch of measures to expand female workforce, and possibly certain cultural factors specific to these places as well.

¹⁷ SWD has planned to provide around (a) 900 places through 10 new standalone CCCs in various development projects in three to four years from 2020-2021, and (b) 1 000 places in 28 centres through the purchase of premises scheme in phases from 2021-2022.

¹⁸ While low-income families can apply for fee remission of 50%-100%, there are criticisms that the income ceilings for eligibility are too low. Taking four-person families for example, monthly income thresholds for partial and full remission are HK\$34,290 and HK\$19,750 respectively (i.e. 77% and 44% of median earnings of households in the same size). In 2021-2022, only 1 659 children received such subsidies. See 香港社會服務聯會(2019).

¹⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022a).

Figure 3 – LFPR for males and females aged 25-54 in selected advanced places in 2021



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022a).

3.2 On major policy measures taken in OECD to expand female workforce, **more abundant provision of child care services is widely regarded as the most important measure.** In OECD, as many as 36.1% of infants aged under three were enrolled in child care services in 2019, and the average public spending on pre-primary and child care services stood at a high level of 0.7% of GDP in 2017.²⁰ An OECD study also concluded that “rising provision of child care formal services to working parents with children not yet three years old (i.e. before entering kindergarten) is a main policy driver of female labour force participation”.²¹ *Secondly*, more generous family leave policies in OECD enable mothers to work. On average, parents in OECD are entitled to 18.6 weeks of paid maternity leave, 2.1 weeks of paid paternity leave and 39.3 weeks of paid child carers’ leave.²² *Thirdly*, employees in many member states have a statutory right to request flexible working arrangements (“FWA”) from their employers in order to take care of their children. FWA can be in the form of flexible arrangements on hours (e.g. staggered hours and compressed work-week), workplace (e.g. teleworking and work from

²⁰ The respective figures for Hong Kong were estimated at 15.2% (enrolment rate) and 0.3% (spending as % of GDP) in 2021-2022.

²¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013).

²² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022c).

home) and workload (e.g. part-time and job-sharing).²³ *Fourthly*, there are statutory measures to reduce gender inequality in the workplace, including (a) mandatory requirements for employers to disclose statistics on gender pay gap or job composition to the public as promulgated in Canada and Finland; and (b) setting a women’s quota of 40% for boards of directors in publicly listed companies in the European Union (“EU”). Greater gender equality can incentivize women to work. *Fifthly*, some countries offer extra tax incentives to induce the second earner in a family to come forward to work, such as tax exemption of up to C\$14,000 (HK\$81,600) in Canada.

3.3 Most recently in 2019, EU took additional legislative actions to promote gender equality in the workplace. They included enactment of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, with a view to raising “the participation of women in the labour market”.²⁴ All member states are obliged to come up with their own measures to achieve the policy objective by August 2022. Moreover, EU in December 2022 reached an agreement on the legislative proposal to narrow the gender pay gap by enhancing pay transparency, pending formal approval.

3.4 Turning to **the Mainland**, the Constitution stipulates that women are equal to men in all spheres of life, in line with the famous quote “women holding up half the sky”. In 1990, LFPR for females aged 15-64 stood at a high level of 79.4%,²⁵ just short of the figure for males by 9.4 percentage points (**Figure 4**). To a certain extent, this high work propensity for women was attributable to their tendency to enter the labour market at a young age given the fewer educational opportunities back then. Also relevant was provision of child care by prevailing state-owned or collectively-owned enterprises by then. However, the female LFPR has witnessed a continued downtrend afterwards, falling to a low of 68.6% in 2019 (and the gap against men widened to 14.2 percentage points) partly on the back of rapid expansion of higher education opportunities for young people. Other contributory factors included proliferation of private enterprises (which are more reluctant to offer child care services for female employees relative to state-owned enterprises) in the Mainland after the early 1990s, and increased reports of sex discrimination in the workplace.²⁶

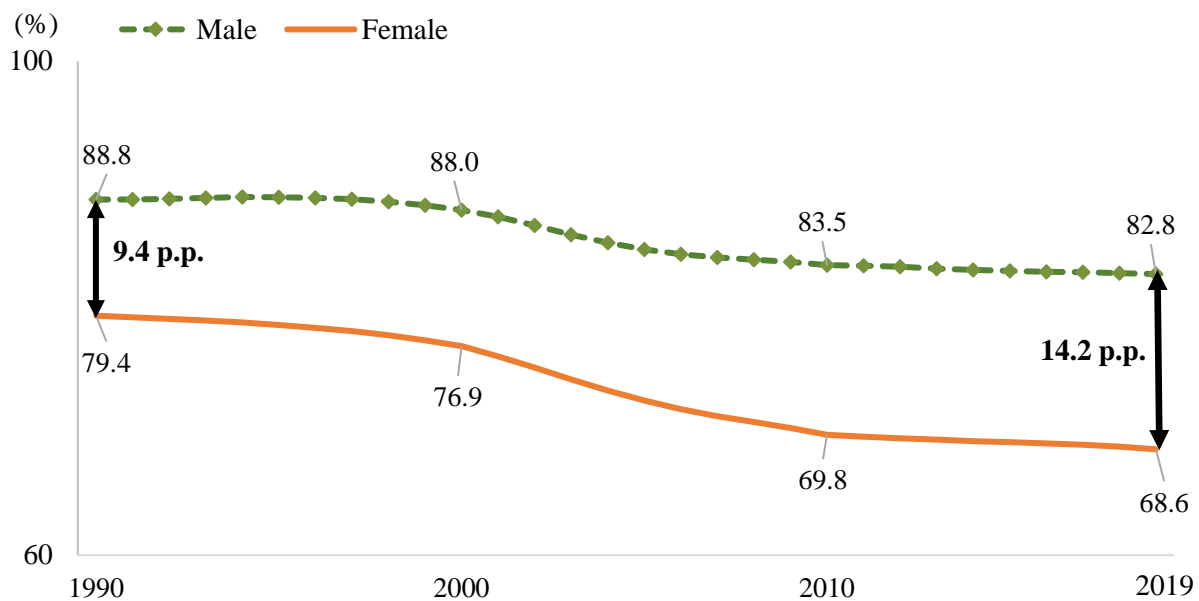
²³ All member states of the European Union grant the right to parents with children of up to at least eight years old. Germany and the Netherlands grant the right to all workers, regardless of their family status.

²⁴ Directive 2019/1158/EU. See European Commission (2019).

²⁵ There is no publicly available information on further breakdown of LFPR by age group in the Mainland.

²⁶ A nationwide survey shows that only 5.5% of children aged under three enrolled in child care facilities in 2021. See 新華網 (2021), Wang et al. (2020) and Yang (2020).

Figure 4 – LFPR for males and females aged 15-64 in the Mainland



Source: World Bank (2022).

3.5 With a view to achieving greater gender equality by 2030, the Central Government released the “Outline of Women’s Development in China (2021-2030)” in September 2021. This was followed by amendment of the “Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests” in October 2022, laying down more specific rules against gender discrimination. For example, employers are not allowed to ask candidates about their marital status in recruitment as from January 2023. After the announcement of the third-child policy in 2021, the Central Government also pledges stronger child care support, more tax breaks and FWA in the future. Provincial and municipal governments are keen to launch their measures to promote work-life balance of women. For instance, while the maternity leave is extended to 178 days in Guangdong and 158 days in Shanghai (compared with the nationwide requirement of 98 days), paternity leave and child care leave are also introduced in most provinces and municipalities.²⁷

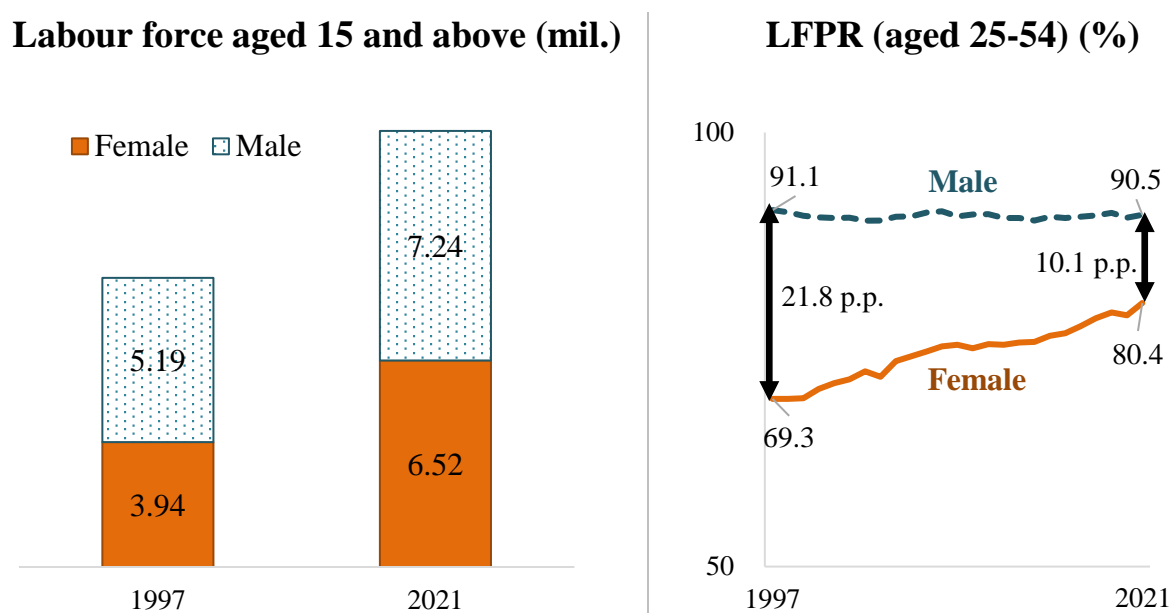
4. Policy measures to expand female workforce in Australia

4.1 Australia is an acclaimed forerunner in promotion of gender equality, with a ministerial position (Minister for Women) and a dedicated government agency (Women’s Affairs Branch under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet)

²⁷ As of June 2022, all the 31 provinces and municipalities offered paternity leave of 10-30 days and 30 offered child care leave (mostly of 10 days per year for each parent of children aged under three).

created as early as in 1976 to oversee the relevant development.²⁸ More specifically for the workplace, the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission (the then government agency responsible for setting national wage standards) introduced the principle of “equal pay for equal work” in 1969, removing the 25% gender gap in basic wage rate (i.e. statutory minimum wage). This was followed by the enactment of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (which made sex-based discriminatory practices in hiring, promotion and compensation unlawful) and robust expansion of child care services in the 1990s. During the last 24 years, Australian female labour force expanded by 65% to 6.52 million in 2021, taking up 47.4% of the total labour force (**Figure 5**). LFPR for females aged 25-54 also surged from 69.3% to 80.4% over the same period.

Figure 5 – Trends in labour force by sex in Australia



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022).

4.2 At the Group of Twenty (“G20”) meeting held in Brisbane in November 2014, Australia made a pledge to further reduce the gender gap in overall LFPR (i.e. aged 15 and above) from 12.1 percentage points in 2012 to 9.1 percentage points by 2025.²⁹ This was followed by publication of the policy paper entitled “An Australian Government Strategy to Boost Women’s Workforce Participation” in July 2017, reiterating the policy target to narrow the gender gap in LFPR by 25% and thus enable additional 200 000 women to work (both compared with 2012 levels)

²⁸ Women’s Affairs Branch was renamed as “Office for Women” in 2004, now still directly under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

²⁹ Neither G20 nor Australia set a specific LFPR target for prime working age population.

by 2025.³⁰ The Office for Women is the responsible agency for implementation and coordination across departments.

4.3 Major policy measures taken by the Australian government to expand female workforce are briefly summarized as follows:

(a) **Robust expansion in supply of child care places before 2010:**

Accessibility and affordability of child care services covering those aged below 13 are the top policy priorities in Australia.³¹ Fee subsidies to parents were first granted for child care services offered by non-profit operators in 1984, and extended to those offered by commercial operators as well in 1990. Supply soon caught up with demand upon universal subsidy coverage, resulting in tripling in the number of child care places in just a decade to 500 000 in 2001 (equivalent to 14.6% of children aged below 13). Grants were offered to those intending to set up new services, such as funding for establishment and initial operation of centres in rural areas during 2001 to 2004. As a result of the rapid increase in supply, the enrolment rate of child care services for infants aged under three surged from 8% in 1984 to 38% in 2010 and held generally stable in the next decade to stand at 40% in 2021;³²

(b) **Affordable child care amidst generous subsidies:** To improve affordability of child care, the Australian government increased expenditure on early childhood services steeply by 80.4% in 10 years to hit A\$12.4 billion (HK\$64.1 billion) in 2021, or 0.6% of its GDP.³³ Under the Child Care Subsidy revamped in 2018, assistance is focused on parents in lower income families, who are now required to pay just 15% of user fees of child care services, with the rest subsidized by the government.³⁴ For middle to higher income families, the amount of subsidy is smaller and the pertinent parents need to shoulder up to 80% of user fees.³⁵ Moreover, those parents with more children and

³⁰ This in turn could also increase the overall productivity of the Australian economy. See Australian Government (2017a).

³¹ Most (97.6%) of the children in child care used centre-based services in 2021. See Productivity Commission (2022).

³² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) and Productivity Commission (2022).

³³ In the 2022-2023 budget, Australian government committed an additional A\$4.5 billion (HK\$23.3 billion) over four years to further improving affordability of child care services.

³⁴ The monthly income ceiling for this group is A\$6,040 (HK\$31,230), representing 85% of the national median household income.

³⁵ The income ceiling for this group is higher at A\$29,730 (HK\$153,700) per month, quadrupling the national median household income.

longer working hours could also receive higher subsidies. As the government subsidizes over 60% of child care costs, per child out-of-pocket expenses for a “benchmark” family are just about 8% of the household income;³⁶

- (c) **Longer and more flexible parental leave:** As from 2011, Australian employees are entitled to 18 weeks of maternity leave and 2 weeks of paternity leave, all paid by the government.³⁷ Six weeks of the maternity leave can be reserved and re-allocated as child care leave before the child turns two years old. For more flexibility, the government decided most recently in October 2022 to increase total parental leave (i.e. sum of paternity leave and maternity leave) from 20 weeks to 26 weeks by 2026 by phases, and both parents can decide how to split the leave amongst themselves. This apart, employees are entitled to ten days of “sick and carer’s leave” paid by employers each year;
- (d) **Statutory right to request FWA:** After the legislation of the Fair Work Act in 2009, all employees in Australia have the statutory right to request FWA from their employers. Regardless of family status, they can ask for changes in working hours, location and patterns of work (e.g. job sharing). Employers must give employees a written response upon receipt of the request within 21 days, stating whether they grant or refuse the request and providing reasons if they refuse. As a result, 82% of employers reported that they had instituted FWA policy in 2021. This apart, employees could also lodge their complaints to the Fair Work Ombudsman created under the Fair Work Act 2009 for any discriminatory practice in the workplace;
- (e) **Mandatory disclosure on gender equality in workplace:** Under the Workplace Gender Equality Act legislated in 2012, larger business establishments in the private sector employing at least 100 employees (covering 40% of employees nationwide in 2021) are mandatorily required to submit annual reports on gender equality to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. These reports need to cover areas like (i) gender pay gaps, (ii) gender composition of employees and board

³⁶ The out-of-pocket cost is calculated by OECD for families with parents earning 100% and 67% of average wages, assuming two children of 2-3 years old, bearing in mind a wide variation in prices across places in Australia. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022c) and Australian Parliamentary Library (2019).

³⁷ While the leave pay is made only at the national minimum wage of A\$3,250 (HK\$16,800) per month, it covers part-time and casual workers as well as full-timers.

members, and (iii) measures to promote gender equality.³⁸ Not only are non-compliant employers named and shamed in public, they will also be disqualified from government procurement; and

- (f) **Tax incentives for working mothers:** On top of tax rebate for children, eligible single parents and second family earners (who are mostly women) are entitled to extra tax rebate of up to A\$4,773 (HK\$24,680) each year. However, this tax incentive is in part offset by the high marginal tax rates (e.g. 32.5% for annual taxable income between A\$45,001-A\$120,000 (HK\$232,660-HK\$620,400)) in the Australian tax system. Reportedly, this tax incentive has limited effect to encourage women to work longer hours and earn more.³⁹

4.4 The aforementioned policy measures in Australia seem to be effective in unleashing female workforce, as the gender gap in overall LFPR narrowed from 12.1 percentage points in 2012 to 9.4 percentage points in 2021 (very close to the policy target of 9.1 percentage points by 2025).⁴⁰ More specifically for mothers with children under 15, their LFPR also rose significantly, from 57.2% in 1991 to 73.3% in 2020.⁴¹ There are also improvements in other areas of gender workplace equality, including discernibly reducing the glass ceiling and gender pay gap. For instance, the proportion of females on boards of directors of the top 200 listed companies in Australia shot up from 25.3% in 2016 to 35.7% in 2022,⁴² whereas the differential in median weekly income between men and women working full-time narrowed from 16.0% in 2011 to 10.4% in 2021.⁴³ In terms of the global ranking in gender equality, Australia was ranked the 19th in 2021, broadly similar to the 18th in 2011.⁴⁴

³⁸ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2021, undated).

³⁹ It is estimated that for mothers switching from part-time work to full-time work, the higher tax payable and reduced child care benefits would effectively offset 75%-120% of the extra earnings arising from the increased hours of work. See KPMG (2018).

⁴⁰ For people in prime working age, the gender gap in LFPR narrowed from 12.9 percentage points in 2012 to 10.1 percentage points in 2021.

⁴¹ National Skills Commission (2021).

⁴² Australian Institute of Company Directors (2022).

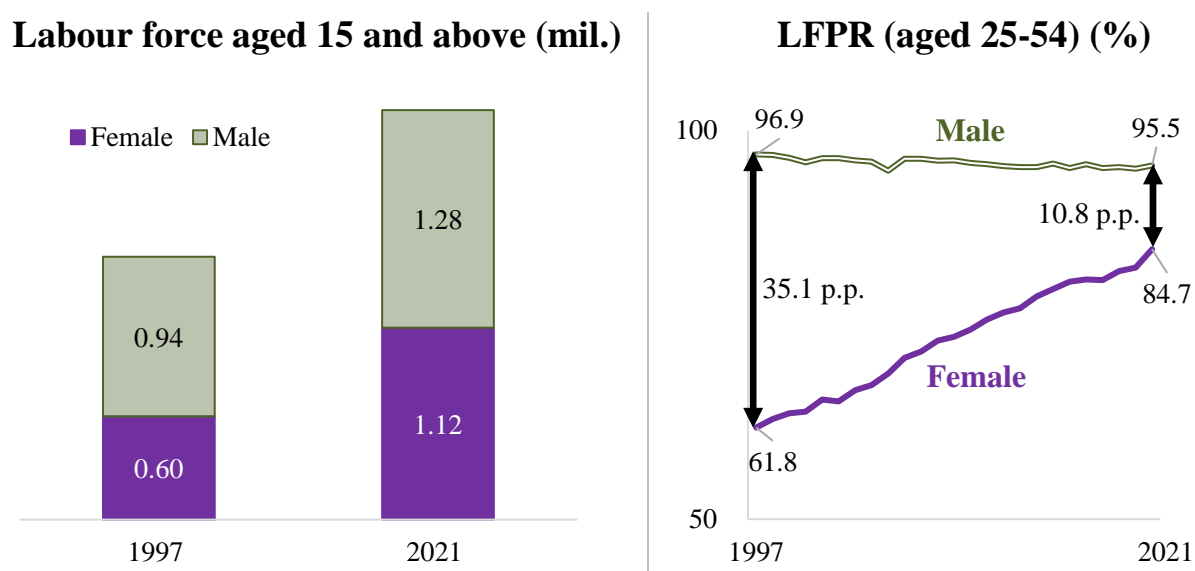
⁴³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022a) and Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021).

⁴⁴ United Nations (2022).

5. Policy measures to expand female workforce in Singapore

5.1 In Singapore, the government has been keen to boost fertility in the context of falling birth rate since the 1970s. Many family-friendly measures with a key objective to encourage childbirths have a synergy effect of incentivizing working mothers to stay in employment after childbirth and promoting greater gender equality.⁴⁵ Indicative of this development, the female labour force in Singapore witnessed an 86.2% upsurge in 24 years to 1.12 million in 2021, accounting for 46.8% of total labour force (**Figure 6**). LFPR for women aged 25-54 even shot up by 22.9 percentage points over the same period to hit 84.7% in 2021, probably the highest in Asia-Pacific.

Figure 6 – Trends in labour force by sex in Singapore⁽¹⁾



Note: (1) Data for Singaporean residents.
Source: Singapore Department of Statistics (2022).

5.2 As for the gender gap in LFPR between men and women aged 25-54, it narrowed nearly by two-thirds over the past 24 years, from 35.1 percentage points in 1997 to 10.8 percentage points in 2021. However, the Singaporean government is not complacent and recognizes the need to build “a fairer and more inclusive society” under which “men and women partner each other as equals”. It published the “White Paper on Singapore Women’s Development” (“White Paper”) in

⁴⁵ For more information on measures to boost childbirths, please refer to the Essentials on “Measures to encourage childbirths in Singapore”. See Legislative Council Secretariat (2021c).

March 2022, containing a number of new workplace initiatives.⁴⁶ The White Paper was then submitted to the Parliament for debate and unanimously endorsed in April 2022.

5.3 Below is a summary of the existing measures and new initiatives on women employment in Singapore:

- (a) **Robust expansion in the supply of child care places:** There were just 713 centres offering 59 433 child care places in Singapore back in 2005. However, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong undertook to “invest” substantially in the early childhood sector in an attempt to lift fertility rate in 2012. With enhanced allocation of financial and land for setting up new child care centres, government spending on early childhood sector quintupled in just nine years to S\$1.8 billion (HK\$10.2 billion) in 2021. Concurrently, the ratio of this spending to GDP tripled to 0.3%.⁴⁷ As a result, 586 new centres were set up between 2012 and 2021, providing 99 100 additional child care places. By now, there are 11 600 child care places targeted for infants aged 1.5 years old and below, representing around 23% of the infant population. For young children aged from 1.5 to 6 years old, there are 179 000 child care places, representing 86% of the children population in that age group. The enrolment rate was 18% for infants and 67% for young children in 2021, thus enabling mothers to work;
- (b) **Affordable child care amidst generous subsidies:** To make child care services more affordable, Singapore gives parents a non-means tested monthly subsidy of up to S\$600 (HK\$3,390) for infant care and S\$300 (HK\$1,695) for young children. For working mothers in low to middle income families, the government provides additional monthly subsidy of up to S\$710 (HK\$4,012).⁴⁸ For some 900 privately-run child care centres, the government also subsidizes them on the condition that they adhere to a fee cap.⁴⁹ Thanks to this generous subsidy policy, as many as two-thirds (66.4%) of the

⁴⁶ Government of Singapore (2022).

⁴⁷ Ang et al. (2020) and Ministry of Social and Family Development (2022b).

⁴⁸ The additional subsidy is granted to working mothers with monthly household income below S\$12,000 (HK\$67,800), i.e. at about 126.1% of Singapore’s median household earnings in 2021. The lower the income, the higher the additional subsidy. See Government of Singapore (2023).

⁴⁹ As from January 2023, the monthly fees for full-day child care and infant care services are capped at S\$720 (HK\$4,070) and S\$1,290 (HK\$7,290) respectively. Centres run by large operators are subject to even lower caps. See CNA (2022).

147 900 children and infants enrolled in child care centres were covered by subsidies in 2021. As a whole (even taking non-subsidized places into account), the median monthly fees of child care and infant care represented only 4.8% and 7.1% of the median household income respectively in 2021;

- (c) **Longer and wider coverage of parental leave:** The paid maternity leave was extended to 16 weeks in 2008, and paid paternity leave to two weeks in 2017.⁵⁰ There is flexibility in sharing the parental leave, as fathers can take up to four weeks of additional leave through an offsetting reduction in maternity leave upon mothers' consent. Moreover, each parent is entitled to six days of paid child care leave annually before children turn seven years old, and two days each year afterwards until they turn thirteen.⁵¹ For infants aged under two, both parents are also entitled to unpaid infant care leave of six days each year;
- (d) **Statutory right to request FWA by 2024:** So far, it is still voluntary for employers in Singapore to make FWA in accordance with the "Tripartite Standards on FWA" agreed by the government, trade unions and the employers' federation. Yet the government introduced initiatives to encourage employers to do so, such as rolling out the Work-Life Grant ("WLG") to support adoption of FWA in 2013. In short, a per capita subsidy of S\$2,000 (HK\$11,640) was offered to enterprises for supporting their employees to adopt FWA regularly, subject to a biennial maximum of S\$70,000 (HK\$407,400) per company.⁵² Some 27% of Singaporean employees benefited from this voluntary FWA in the early-2022, and the government aimed to increase the coverage ratio to 40% by end-2022.

Most recently, the Singaporean government has taken "a stronger stance" against unfair employment practices against women, pledging in the aforementioned White Paper to make it a mandatory duty for all employers to consider FWA requests "fairly and properly" by 2024.

⁵⁰ Maternity leave is co-paid by employers and the government, and paternity leave solely by the government. See Ministry of Social and Family Development (2023).

⁵¹ Leave for children aged under seven is co-paid by employers and the government, whilst leave for older children is paid by the government. See Ministry of Social and Family Development (2023).

⁵² In August 2020, the grant stopped accepting applications in view of an upsurge in FWA amidst the COVID-19 outbreak. The WLG coverage increased to over 90 000 employees in some 8 000 companies during April to August 2020 after the outbreak of COVID-19. See Ministry of Manpower (2020b).

The aim is to boost the use of FWAs while still allowing employers to reject such requests on grounds of business needs. To this end, the Singaporean government will introduce a new “Tripartite Guidelines on FWA” with legal backing by 2024;⁵³ and

- (e) **Tax incentives for working mothers:** Similar to the case of Australia, the “Working Mother’s Child Relief” in Singapore launched in 2005 offers an extra and unique incentive to women to “remain in the workforce after having children”.⁵⁴ In short, it exempts part of working mothers’ earned incomes in calculating personal income tax. The exemption rate is also progressive in relation to the birth order of children in the household, increasing from 15% for the first child to 20% for the second child, and 25% for the third child and beyond.

5.4 Both pro-natalist and gender equality initiatives in Singapore seem to have made a positive impact on work propensity of women over the years, as manifested by the aforementioned sharp rise of 22.9 percentage points in LFPR for prime working age women between 1997 and 2021. There is also progress in other areas of workplace equality, as seen in a rise in the proportion of women in the board of directors of the top 100 listed companies in Singapore from 10.8% in 2016 to 20.8% in 2022.⁵⁵ The gender wage gap of full-time resident employees was also reduced, albeit just moderately, from 9.9% in 2011 to 9.0% in 2021.⁵⁶ Thus, the global ranking of Singapore in terms of gender equality stood high at the 7th position in 2021, broadly similar to the 8th in 2011.⁵⁷

6. Observations

6.1 In **Hong Kong**, notwithstanding visible improvement in female workforce participation in recent decades, the gender gap in LFPR in prime working age was still wide at 20.7 percentage points in 2021. Even with recent improvement measures, many local women still consider a lack of affordable child care services as the largest hurdle in work, followed by rigid working arrangements and

⁵³ Ministry of Manpower (2021) and The Straits Times (2022).

⁵⁴ This apart, “parenthood tax rebates” are offered to Singaporean parents, amounting to S\$5,000 (HK\$28,250) each year for the first child, S\$10,000 (HK\$56,500) for the second child, and S\$20,000 (S\$113,000) for the third and subsequent child. Conceptually, this is broadly similar to “child allowance” in Hong Kong, without consideration of work propensity of mothers. See Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (2022).

⁵⁵ Council for Board Diversity (2022).

⁵⁶ Ministry of Manpower (2020a, 2022).

⁵⁷ United Nations (2022).

discriminatory practices reported in some workplaces.

6.2 In both **Australia** and **Singapore**, the respective gender gaps in LFPR for population in prime working age were smaller, at just 10.1 and 10.8 percentage points. More abundant supply of child care services, significant government subsidy to relevant services, longer and more flexible parental leave, tax incentives targeting working mothers, and workplace equality initiatives are key success factors in these two places. Regarding statutory rights to request FWA, Australia has already implemented the policy while Singapore intends to introduce the necessary legislation by 2024.

6.3 More specifically for **Australia**, the Office for Women directly under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet is indicative of the top-level emphasis being placed on encouraging women's workforce participation. Meanwhile, the experience in **Singapore** of improving LFPR for prime working age women by more than 20 percentage points over three decades may provide some insights into devising policies that can achieve the dual objectives of incentivizing childbearing and at the same time empowering women to develop gainful careers.

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Policy measures to expand female workforce in selected places

		Hong Kong	Australia	Singapore			
A. Key indicators on female workforce development during 1997-2021							
		1997	2021	1997	2021	1997	2021
1.	Total female labour force (millions) (% in total labour force)	1.14 (36.9)	1.62 (45.8)	3.94 (43.1)	6.52 (47.4)	0.60 (40.1)	1.12 (46.8)
2.	LFPR for females aged 25-54 (%)	59.7	72.7	69.3	80.4	61.8	84.7
3.	Gender gap in LFPR for persons aged 25-54 (p.p.)	37.3	20.7	21.8	10.1	35.1	10.8
4.	Gender wage gap at median full-time income (%) ⁽¹⁾	11.5 (2011)	9.5	16.0 (2011)	10.4	9.9 (2011)	9.0
5.	Female share on board of top listed companies (%)	11.1 (2016)	17.1 (2022)	25.3 (2016)	35.7 (2022)	10.8 (2016)	20.8 (2022)
B. Child care support for working parents in 2021							
6.	Government expenditure on early childhood education and care (% in GDP)	HK\$7.1 billion (0.3)		HK\$64.1 billion (0.6)		HK\$10.2 billion (0.3)	
7.	Child care enrolment rate: infants aged ≤2 years old	15.2		39.7		18.0 ⁽²⁾	
8.	Non-means-tested subsidies for parents (monthly)	HK\$600 ⁽³⁾		×		HK\$1,700-HK\$3,400	
9.	Means-tested subsidies	✓		✓		✓	
10.	Out-of-pocket costs for full-time infant care (as % of household income) ⁽⁴⁾	20.1		8.0		7.1	
C. Paid leave for working parents							
11.	Maternity leave (weeks)	14		18		16	
12.	Paternity leave (days)	5		14		14	
13.	Child care leave (days per year)	×		10		6	
D. Flexible working arrangements							
14.	Statutory right to request FWA	×		✓		By 2024	
15.	Financial incentives to employers	×		×		×	
E. Other policy measures							
16.	Mandatory gender reporting	×		✓		×	
17.	Beneficiaries of tax incentives for women to work	single parents		secondary earners, single parents		working mothers	

Notes: (1) Gender wage gap is presented as a percentage of men's wage.

(2) Refers to infants aged 18 months or below.

(3) For users of aided child care centres only.

(4) Figures use the proportion of median costs in median household income for Hong Kong (aided places before fee remission) and Singapore (aided and non-aided places after basic fee subsidy). For Australia, it refers to post-subsidy costs for couples earning 100% and 67% of average wages.

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Note: ^ Internet resources listed in this section were accessed in February 2023.