

Education Policy [1]

Education is one of the most important areas in enhancing women's development and status. Through education, women are empowered in terms of their personal capacities and are enabled to fully develop their potential. In the past, traditional male-chauvinist thinking often restricted women access to formal education. The situation was changed in 1970s.



Belilios Public School - Class photo
Source: Donated by Ms. TSANG Chui-mei

In the beginning, the Hong Kong Government assumed a facilitative role in the provision of education, and hence private schools were set up much earlier than government schools. The first government girls' school was the Belilios Public School founded in 1890. It was originally called the Central School for Girls and located at the existing site of the Central Police Station.



Students of Perth Street Government Middle School (now the Homantin Government Secondary School) having lesson in the laboratory. It was a boys' school in the early years and started to admit girls in the 1960s.
Source: Donated by Ms. LAU Yuen-sheung

In view of the rapid population growth, the Government reviewed its education policy in the 1950s and introduced the Seven-year Expansion Programme for Primary Schools in 1955. But primary school places still fell short of the demand. To address the problem, Rev. Verent John Russell Mills made a proposal to the Government for allowing voluntary organisations to provide education for children in grassroots families by opening primary schools at the rooftops of resettlement estates. With the introduction of the nine-year free and universal basic education in 1978, such rooftop primary schools became history.



Students playing in a roof-top school in the 1960s
Source: Information Services Department



A scene in the 1960s of students having lesson in a roof-top school
Source: Information Services Department

Education Policy [2]



Students having lesson in the laboratory



Students having Home Economics class



Students learning Chinese calligraphy

Free and Universal Basic Education

In 1971, the Hong Kong Government introduced six-year free and universal basic education, which was further extended to nine years in 1978, enabling all children aged from 6 to 15, boys and girls alike, to have equal rights and access to education. Since then, the number of girls without education dropped significantly from 56.4% in 1971 to 47.2% in 1976, further down to 40.3% in 1978. The opportunities for girls to receive senior secondary education were also widened. Amongst the female population aged 15 or above, the percentage with secondary education or above increased from 50.0% in 1986 to 71.9% in 2006.



Students playing violins

Tertiary Education

While girls' schools had already come into the scene as early as the end of the 19th century, girls still had no access to the local university. The University of Hong Kong admitted only male students in its early years and female intakes were allowed only since 1921. The first female graduate of the University of Hong Kong was Rachel Irving, daughter of Edward Alexander Irving, then Director of Education, who graduated in 1923. The first local female graduate was Irene Ho Tung, daughter of Sir Robert Ho Tung, who graduated in 1925. Thereafter, the number of female undergraduates grew steadily from 38 in 1928 to 112 in 1939. By 2006, female students in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong have outnumbered their male counterparts and accounted for 52.2% of the total.

Education in Earlier Times[1]



Before Hong Kong underwent industrialisation, boys in the rural areas usually received schooling in ancestral halls or temples, while girls seldom had access to education. Until the early 19th century, some wealthy families started to arrange their daughters to study with their brothers at home under private tutelage.

Students having Domestic Science class
Source: Diocesan Girls' School



A school picnic on the beach (1910s)
Source: St. Stephen's Girls' College,
Hong Kong



Students having Physical Education
class (1920s)
Source: St. Stephen's Girls' College,
Hong Kong

Protestant Girls' Schools

During the colonial years, missionaries from Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States and France came to Hong Kong and founded schools as a way to spread their faith, opening up the opportunity to form girls' schools. The first girls' school in Hong Kong was founded by Ms. Henrietta Hall Shuck of American Baptists, which was then followed by a succession of boarding schools for girls founded by other churches. Only then did girls have access to formal schooling. The following are the various girls' schools founded by Christian bodies in the early years:

Year 1843

The London Missionary Society founded the Ying Wa College and enrolled some girls. The Ying Wa Girls' School was founded by Ms. Helen Davies in 1900.

Year 1860

Mrs. Smith, wife of the first Bishop of Victoria, founded the Diocesan Native Female Training School for Chinese Girls, which was subsequently renamed Diocesan Girls' School.

Year 1886

The Church Mission Society of Britain founded the Fairlea School, a vernacular school for girls. In 1936, the school merged with the Victoria Home and Orphanage and was renamed Heep Yunn School.

Year 1906

The Church Missionary Society of the Anglican Church of England, together with Sir Ho Kai and other Chinese businessmen, founded the St. Stephen's Girls' College.

Year 1949

The American Presbyterian Church relocated the True Light Middle School from Guangzhou to Hong Kong and renamed it Kowloon True Light Middle School.

Education in Earlier Times[2]



Source: Canossian Missions

Catholic Girls' Schools

There are also a number of girls' schools founded by the Catholic religious orders. During the Second World War, many orphanages were destroyed in air raids, leaving many orphans homeless. Some Catholic religious orders started to build orphanages, or "Ying Tang" (baby's homes) in Chinese, in 1948. To keep pace with social needs, these orphanages were later converted into girls' schools or boarding schools. The following are the girls' schools and orphanages founded by Catholic religious orders in the early years:

Year 1854

The Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres founded a French missionary school, which was renamed St. Paul's Convent School in 1955.



Source: Canossian Missions

Year 1860

The Canossian Daughters of Charity from Italy founded the Italian Convent School, which was renamed Sacred Heart Canossian College in 1960.

Year 1869

The Canossian Daughters of Charity founded an orphanage, which became the present St. Francis' Canossian College.

Year 1900

The Canossian Daughters of Charity founded the St. Mary's Canossian College.

Schools Founded by Social Organisations

Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is the first women organisation founded by local women in Hong Kong. In the early days, female immigrants to Hong Kong were generally not well educated. This prompted YWCA to start organising literacy classes for working women in 1922 and to open its first night school in 1925. In 1938, YWCA set up its labour and women departments. By 1945, there were already seven night schools established by YWCA to provide education for female workers aged 16 or above. Courses offered included Chinese studies, mathematics, abacus practice and craftsmanship.



Literacy class

To rebuild the society and train up the citizens after the Second World War, many organisations began to open night schools. For instance, the Education Advancement Society for Workers in Hong Kong and Kowloon founded the Night Schools for Women Workers in Sham Shui Po and To Kwa Wan in 1947 to offer courses at Primary 1 to 4 levels to female textile workers. The two night schools were later renamed Sham Shui Po Workers' Night School and To Kwa Wan Workers' Night School respectively.

To cite another example, in January 1948, the Hong Kong Chinese Women's Club also opened craftsmanship and literacy classes for women and founded its first free night school in February 1948. The Club set up its second and third free night schools in 1949 and 1959 respectively to promote female education.



The First Free Evening School (1948)



The Second Free Evening School (1949)

Capacity Building Mileage Programme

Launched in March 2004, the Capacity Building Mileage Programme (CBMP) is the first large-scale, tailor-made learning programme with a women focus. It is initiated by the Women's Commission, and implemented jointly by the Open University of Hong Kong, the Commercial Radio and nearly 80 partnering women's groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The CBMP differs from other vocational and educational courses in that it is aimed to facilitate participants to enhance their learning capacities, stimulate their curiosity, develop their potentials, build-up self-confidence, and to foster a positive mindset to cope with life challenges, leading to more colourful lives.

The CBMP has no entry requirement and is designed with flexible learning mode. Courses are mainly taught through radio broadcasting, supplemented by optional learning activities and face-to-face courses organised by NGOs. The subjects are relevant to daily activities of women, including managing interpersonal relationships, financial management, health and practical issues in daily lives.

Up to November 2007, the cumulative number of enrolments exceeded 20,000 and there is also a large network of audience reached through the radio programmes. Feedback from students shows that they have benefited from the programme in terms of increased interests in learning, and enhanced confidence and knowledge in resolving problems in daily life.



Source: Women's Commission



Source: Women's Commission



Source: The Open University of Hong Kong



Source: The Open University of Hong Kong

Adult Education, Continuing Education and Vocational Training

Along with the development of the society, a variety of educational modes and resources became available, offering more learning opportunities to women.

Adult Education

Adult schools operated by social organisations were generally modest in scale and could no longer meet the demand after the Second World War. In such circumstances, the Education Department established in 1954 an adult education section dedicated to the planning of adult education programmes.

• Adult Education Subvention Scheme

The Government introduced the Adult Education Subvention Scheme in 1980 to subsidise non-governmental organisations to organise short and informal courses as well as special education courses for disabled adults. Courses tailored for women were also offered under the Scheme, including basic Putonghua, stress management, computer and adaptation programmes for newly arrived women. In the 2004-05 academic year, women constituted about 80% of the enrolment for these subvented courses.

Continuing Education

• Skills Upgrading Scheme

The Skills Upgrading Scheme was set up by the Government in September 2001 with HK\$400 million funding for the purpose of assisting low-skilled and low education workers to adapt to the changing economic environment. At present, the Scheme covers 23 industries and has organised about 7,700 classes. Over 156,000 persons have benefited under the Scheme, with over 65% of them being women.

• Continuing Education Fund

The Continuing Education Fund was set up by the Government in 2002 with HK\$5 billion funding for the purpose of subsidising citizens aged between 18 and 60 to pursue continuing education. Applicants will be reimbursed 80% of the fees for the courses that they have successfully completed, up to a maximum of HK\$10,000 per applicant. As at the end of May 2006, there were over 260,000 applications and about 60% were submitted by female applicants.

Vocational Training

Since its establishment in 1982, the Vocational Training Council (VTC) has provided vocational courses awarding higher diplomas, diplomas and craft certificates as well as continuing training for the working population. The VTC offers pre-employment and on-the-job training courses to over 160,000 students and trainees each year. For 2003-04, women accounted for about 37% of the graduates from VTC's vocational courses. Of the graduates from industrial training courses, about 40% were women.



Picture Source: Canossian Missions

Gender Education

Gender education has multiple objectives. It aims at prompting the society to reflect upon gender-related concepts and institutions, fostering mutual respect between both genders, eliminating gender discrimination and building a gender-equal environment.

In 1985, the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) established the Gender Research Centre, the first research body to focus on gender and women issues in Hong Kong. In 1996, CUHK launched the first gender studies programme in Hong Kong, which has since then been expanded to include bachelor's minor, master's and doctoral degree programmes. Also in 1996, the Centre of Asian Studies of the Hong Kong University started a research project on women studies and held regular talks and seminars on related topics to promote gender education. At present, all tertiary institutions in Hong Kong offer an array of gender-related courses. A wide range of courses and workshops on gender issues are also organised by non-governmental organisations.

On school education, the Government has all along encouraged schools to offer the same subjects to both male and female students. In 2002, the Government issued a set of guidelines to schools stating that male and female students were equally entitled to taking the subjects of Home Economics and Design and Technology. Today, many schools offer these subjects to all students, male and female alike. At the same time, the Government has included a module on gender relationship in the new Liberal Studies subject to instill in students concepts of gender equality and mutual inclusiveness.

Notwithstanding that Hong Kong has gone a long way towards promoting equal access to education for both genders, certain deep-rooted gender stereotypes still persist. For example, arts subjects are still considered by some to be more suitable for girls while boys are thought to have an edge in mathematics and science subjects. On another front, gender awareness is still rather low and gender stereotyping remains prevalent when it comes to the pop culture, especially the mass media, which is generally considered an important platform for gender education and socialisation. We need to make sustained efforts in enhancing both the community's and the media's gender awareness, and promote gender equality and harmony.