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Women in Business: Rise of Female Entrepreneurs in Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since sovereignty over Hong Kong was officially transferred from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China on 1st July 1997, Hong Kong has seen a substantial rise in entrepreneurship. Hong Kong has become one of the world's largest financial and business centres in the 21st century. Today, Hong Kong has become an entrepreneurial hotspot gaining the attention of entrepreneurs from different parts of the world to set up businesses. One of the main reasons being easy to access and entry to Chinese resources from Hong Kong. It is widely known for its ease of doing business, sound legal environment, and advantageous geographical location. The youth have started seeing entrepreneurship as a viable career option. Also, a growing culture of informal investors funding start-ups has seen a rise in Hong Kong. The GEM Hong Kong and Shenzhen Report 2016-17 shows that the start-up rates recorded a staggering increase in Hong Kong and Shenzhen from 2009 to 2016.

According to the Global Entrepreneurialism Report, 45 percent of the entrepreneurs in Hong Kong are women, making Hong Kong rank second (after India with 49% female entrepreneurs) in the whole world. It appears women have the same ambitions as men to set up their own businesses and their styles are similar. The survey showed the average age of women setting up their own business was 30.5 years, compared with 29.9 years for men. Both men and women like to set up businesses in the fields of finance, real estate, retail, and technology. But then there are also differences, with women favouring the fashion business and men preferring construction.

Women were in the workforce as early as the 1920s, but the small population of them often had to fight vigorously for equality of work rights. With the shift of Hong Kong's economy from manufacturing industry to services industry since the 1980s, women have started getting better opportunities in doing business.

Today, women in Hong Kong aim to be independent not only in their personal lives but in the business world too. They have struggled for years to achieve the position they are in today and are continuing to work harder to become more successful. Women have started shining brightly in the business world and on some occasions, have been able to do better than their male counterparts.

BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT IN HONG KONG

Based on multiple legal and economic factors, Hong Kong is called the world's freest economy. It is the second largest host and investor of foreign direct investment (first being the United States of America). It is also the biggest service-oriented economy (90% GDP is from the service sector). In the year 2017, Hong Kong's economy saw a growth of 3.6% from 2% in 2016. The seasonal unemployment rate was 3% compared to 3.6% in 2016. Merchandise exports increased by 8.2%, making Hong Kong the sixth largest exporter of merchandise trade. Hong Kong's major export markets were the Chinese mainland, the EU, the US, ASEAN, India, and Japan. Compared to the global business environment, Hong Kong has performed beyond expectations in the year 2017, mainly in the exports area.

Hong Kong is a free-trade and free-enterprise economy. The Government has a non-interference policy in the private sector but shows its full support by providing a sophisticated legal and administrative framework. This policy has resulted in an increase in the entrepreneurial community.

Hong Kong's start-up-friendly culture is inspiring many women to set up their own business. Organisations like FEW (Female Entrepreneurs Worldwide), an organisation founded by local female entrepreneurs Ines Gafsi and Anna Wong, aim to improve business skills, help women form a global network, and provide more practical advice to aspiring female entrepreneurs. Women are highly welcomed in the business industry.

They are supported and given the necessary resources required to start their own business.

The traditional concept of women's duties being restricted to household work and managing the family has changed drastically over time in Hong Kong. One important difference between men and women is that women can bear children.

This sometimes acts as a barrier in a woman's career. Women are now not just meant to bare babies but they also have the freedom to both work and set up families.

Till the 1970's, there was a marriage bar enforced on women in the workforce which restricted them from many opportunities for further growth and development after marriage. Laws prohibiting discrimination based on sex and marital status has been enforced since the 1990's making life more comfortable for women at work. The idea of women becoming housewives after the marriage has changed after the mid 1990's.

Today, Hong Kong provides a number of benefits to pregnant women as Maternity Rights. They are as follows:

- Maternity leave of 10 weeks, additional time equivalent to the period between the expected and actual date of birth, and up to 4 weeks additional leave in the event of illness or disability related to the birth or pregnancy (and separate from statutory sick leave entitlements).
- Maternity pay for employees employed for longer than 40 weeks, payable for the 10-week maternity leave period and paid at a rate of 4/5ths of the employee's usual salary.
- Protection from the termination of employment following notice of pregnancy being given. This means an employer is barred from dismissing an employee who has handed in their notice of pregnancy for any reason, other than termination for gross misconduct.
- Protection from discrimination on the grounds of their position and status as a mother or for taking maternity leave.
- A pregnant employee who has given a medical certificate cannot be assigned to perform hazardous and strenuous work which may cause a risk to the pregnancy.

Overall, the employers or business owners in Hong Kong are aiming to become a bit more flexible in terms of Maternity Rights as child bearing is not an easy task. It is difficult to predict what is going to happen in such situations and therefore, it must be dealt with high sensitivity.

TOP WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN HONG KONG

- **Ines Gafsi and Anna Wong**

They are the co-founders of FEW (Female Entrepreneurs Worldwide), an organisation which aims to empower female entrepreneurs by providing support, advice and forming global networks. Ines, with her business partner Anna Wong, set up a platform that aims to empower and support entrepreneurial women in Hong Kong and then the whole world.

- **Diane Younes**

She is the founder of Sponge, an on demand beauty service. She found success mainly by research on how women in today's world are very busy and their lives would become easier by bringing the service to their doorsteps.

- **Maxine Ryan**

She has found success in the male-dominated Fintech (financial and technology) field. She is the founder of Bitspark, a cryptocurrency remittance solution for businesses. She aims to use this app to improve existing financial infrastructures in terms of accessibility.

- **Charlotte Chen**

She is behind a large number of apps and services including Spottly travel app, Empyr+co boutique marketing consultancy, etc. She says that she was able to grow so well mainly because of how efficient Hong Kong is as a city.

- **Abby Zhang**

She has launched YEECHOO. She is responsible for bringing the rent-a-designer concept to the city. This allowed many women to be able to afford expensive and fashionable outfits at not very high prices. She believes that the Hong Kong start-up community is very resourceful and people are willing to connect.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

The rate of participation by women in the Hong Kong labour force has been gradually growing. Despite this fact, when it comes to guarding women in the workforce, Hong Kong still has a long way to go. Focusing on growing capital and economically, Hong Kong's employers will often think of the capital gain rather than the welfare of its workers. Women are also still disproportionately under-represented in the higher-status occupations.

Getting married and setting up families is being considered the second option by many aspiring female entrepreneurs in Hong Kong unlike the previous style of settling down with families back in the olden days.

Today, the government is taking an effort to promote female friendly work environments, encouraging and supporting women to start their own businesses and finally become independent. Women's salary levels are yet to catch up with men's salary levels. It must become universally unacceptable for women to receive unequal payment when compared to their male counterparts. The government and various companies are making a determined attempt to remove this inconsistency in gender wages.

Organisations like FEW are providing support to budding female entrepreneurs by providing various essential resources required for setting up businesses and also help them to solidify their positions in the market. Proper guidance is necessary at the initial stages of setting up a business. A few mistakes can lead to losses, failure, and demotivation of the entrepreneur and this should not be overlooked at all costs. If a small group of female entrepreneurs can be this successful at supporting each other and forming such a large network, then one can say that with more support and encouragement, many more women will be willing to become entrepreneurs. Hong Kong aims to make the business environment a type where the gender of the owner will not have an influence on how successful the business is.

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