

Exploring Women's Participation in Sustainability-Related Employment

A Study on the Women Futuremakers Employment Programme (Sustainability Stream)
Preliminary Findings Report

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1. Executive Summary

Hong Kong is witnessing a paradigm shift in its economy, driven by global climate goals and local regulatory requirements for Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) compliance. However, despite the surging demand for green talent, a significant gender gap persists. Women, particularly those from non-traditional academic backgrounds or those returning to the workforce after caregiving, remain underrepresented in this high-growth sector.

This report presents preliminary findings from a pilot research studyⁱ conducted between April and October 2025 on the Women Futuremakers Employment Programme (Sustainability Stream) organised by St. James' Settlement and funded by Standard Chartered Foundation. Through in-depth interviews with participants and programme staff, as well as observations of training workshops, this study evaluates the programme's effectiveness in bridging the gap between women's potential and the green economy.

Key Findings:

- *Redefining "Green Skills"*: The programme successfully democratizes access to the sustainability sector by moving beyond corporate reporting to include circular economy skills (e.g., material reclamation, upcycling design, and community social design).
- *Bridging the Experience Gap*: The "Project-Based Learning" model—where participants solve real-world problems for corporate partners like Rosewood and Link REIT—provides the crucial portfolio experience that fresh graduates and career switchers lack.
- *Empowerment through Community*: For women facing structural barriers (e.g., caregivers, new immigrants), the programme offers vital soft-skills training and a supportive network that combats "imposter syndrome" in a male-dominated field.

Recommendation:

To maximize impact, future iterations of the programme should focus on job crafting for flexible/freelance roles to accommodate caregivers and further strengthen partnerships with Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the circular economy. Continued funding is essential to scale this model of inclusive workforce development.

2. Context: The Green Skills Gap and Gender Barriers in Hong Kong

2.1 The Market Reality: High Demand, Low Supply

Hong Kong's sustainability sector is expanding rapidly. With mandatory ESG reporting for listed companies and the government's *Climate Action Plan 2050*, the demand for green talent has outpaced supply. The market for ESG professionals has seen remarkable growth, with hiring for ESG roles surging by 25% between 2020 and 2022 (China Briefing, 2023). Companies are offering salary premiums exceeding 30% to attract qualified talent.

However, recruitment often favors candidates with finance or engineering degrees, creating a high barrier to entry. While large listed companies may have dedicated in-house sustainability teams, the broader market includes a growing number of third-party consultants and certification staff. Research by Li et al. (2023) highlights that these roles often utilize existing professional infrastructures, yet still present entry challenges for those outside traditional pathways.

2.2 The Gendered Barrier

While women are represented in entry-level administrative roles, they face significant hurdles in advancing or entering technical green roles. Globally, green jobs account for a significantly higher portion of men's employment compared to women's (IMF, 2024). In Hong Kong, specific local factors exacerbate this gap:

- *The "Caregiver Cliff"*: Hong Kong's female labor force participation rate stands at 52.9%, significantly lower than the male rate of 64.7% (Census and Statistics Department, 2024). This participation often stagnates or declines after age 30 due to family responsibilities.
- *The "Double Burden"*: Over 640,000 women in Hong Kong are unpaid family caregivers. The Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres (2024) notes that the lack of "women-friendly workplaces" and flexible policies makes traditional 9-to-6 corporate ESG roles inaccessible to this group.
- *The "STEM Stigma"*: Many women with backgrounds in Arts, Social Sciences, or general administration feel excluded from the "green economy." Research indicates that young people in Hong Kong have low awareness of green jobs and perceive insufficient professional skills as a major barrier (HKFYG, 2024).
- *Workplace Discrimination*: Structural barriers persist, with women reporting significant challenges in employment due to family status (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2023).

2.3 The SJS Intervention

The Women Futuremakers Employment Programme fills a critical void. Unlike expensive academic masters or purely technical vocational courses, SJS offers a holistic intervention. By combining technical training (e.g., carbon management, circular design) with career empowerment (e.g., confidence building,

interview prep), the programme targets the “missing middle”—women who are capable but lack the specific credentials or networks to pivot into sustainability.

3. Programme Impact: Preliminary Findings

The research team analyzed data from *four cohorts* (May 2024 – July 2025), focusing on curriculum evolution, participant experiences, and employment outcomes.

3.1 Democratizing Access: From “Sewing” to “Circular Economy”

A major success of the programme has been its ability to reframe vocational skills as high-value green skills. Early cohorts focused on general sustainability concepts, but feedback led to a pivot in later cohorts towards tangible “hard skills.”

- *Valuing the “Maker”:* Interviews with participants like Fantast, a freelancer with a background in creative arts, revealed that the programme validated “making” as a legitimate green career. Skills previously dismissed as hobbies—such as sewing or woodwork—were professionalized into Textile Upcycling and Sustainable Material Reclamation.
- *Tech-Enabled Sustainability:* The inclusion of AI application and 3D printing training helped bridge the digital divide, allowing participants to modernize traditional craftsmanship for the circular economy.

Impact: This shift expanded the talent pool beyond corporate office seekers to include “green entrepreneurs” and freelancers, aligning with the global rise of the circular economy.

3.2 Solving the “Experience Paradox”

A recurring theme in interviews with fresh graduates (e.g., June, 22) and new immigrants (e.g., Alice, 25) was the “experience paradox”: employers demand experience, but no one will hire them to get it.

- *Real-World Application:* The programme’s collaboration with corporate partners (e.g., Rosewood, Link REIT) allowed participants to act as consultants. For example, the waste management solutions project required participants to analyze real operational data and propose viable interventions.
- *Portfolio Building:* Participants reported that these projects gave them concrete case studies to discuss in job interviews, effectively serving as a proxy for work experience. Alice noted that the “Design Thinking” workshops helped her contextualize her mainland background into local Hong Kong solutions.
- **Translating Experience into Employment:** Across Cohorts 1 through 4, the programme achieved a 72.53% placement rate, with 124 out of 183 graduates successfully securing roles in diverse industries—including sustainability-related fields—or launching green freelance initiatives within six months of completion.

3.3 The “Hidden Curriculum”: Confidence and Agency

Beyond technical skills, the programme addresses the psychological barriers women face.

- *Combating Imposter Syndrome:* Programme staff interviews highlighted that many applicants, despite having transferable skills, lacked the confidence to apply for ESG roles. The inclusion of image consulting and HR mock interviews provided a safe space for participants to articulate their value.
- *Peer Mentorship:* The diverse mix of cohorts—ranging from fresh graduates to mature career switchers—created an organic mentorship ecosystem. Younger participants helped older ones with digital tools, while mature participants shared workplace wisdom. This solidarity is crucial for retention in a new industry.

4. Challenges and Strategic Opportunities

While the programme has demonstrated significant success, the pilot study identified structural challenges that future iterations must address to deepen impact.

4.1 The Flexibility Bottleneck for Caregivers

Jenny (34), a mother and former engineer, represents a key demographic: highly skilled professionals seeking to return to the workforce. However, she noted that most “green jobs” are rigid full-time corporate roles that do not accommodate childcare needs.

- *Opportunity:* The programme is uniquely positioned to advocate for “Job Crafting.” SJS can work with SME partners to carve out project-based or freelance sustainability roles (e.g., ESG data entry, community workshop facilitation) that offer the flexibility caregivers require.

4.2 Navigating “Corporate vs. Community” Values

Some participants expressed skepticism regarding corporate sustainability, fearing “greenwashing.” Fion (34), a participant with an NGO background, felt disconnected from purely corporate reporting tasks.

- *Opportunity:* To retain value-driven talent, the programme should continue to strengthen its Social Innovation track. By highlighting how sustainability solves local community problems (e.g., waste management in Yau Ma Tei), the programme can engage women who are motivated by social impact rather than corporate ladders.

4.3 Employer Engagement

While feedback from corporate partners has been relayed as positive, direct engagement with employers remains an area for growth.

- *Opportunity:* Future phases of the research should include direct interviews with hiring managers to better understand their specific hesitations in hiring non-traditional candidates. This feedback loop will allow SJS to further refine the curriculum to meet industry “pain points.”

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Women Futuremakers Employment Programme (Sustainability Stream) has proven to be a vital “social innovation” in Hong Kong’s labor market. It challenges the narrow definition of green jobs and proves that with the right scaffolding—technical training, real-world projects, and confidence building—women from diverse backgrounds can become key drivers of Hong Kong’s sustainability transition.

Recommendations for Future Funding & Development:

1. *Expand the “Circular Economy” Track:* Continue to professionalize vocational skills (upcycling, repair, material management) as a distinct and valuable career pathway alongside corporate ESG.
2. *Develop “Returnship” Models:* Create a specific sub-stream for caregivers that focuses on freelance, remote, or project-based green work, directly addressing the “flexibility bottleneck.”
3. *Formalize Employer Partnerships:* Move beyond ad-hoc projects to establish formal “green talent pipelines” with SMEs and corporations, ensuring a steady flow of internship and placement opportunities.

By continuing to support this programme, stakeholders are not only investing in individual women’s careers but are actively building a more inclusive, resilient, and diverse green economy for Hong Kong.

Endnote

ⁱ Methodology note: This report is based on a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with 5 programme participants and 1 programme officer, alongside field observations of training workshops conducted between April and August 2025. A comprehensive academic analysis, including a full literature review and theoretical framework, will follow in the final research output.

6. References

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