

# LIFE



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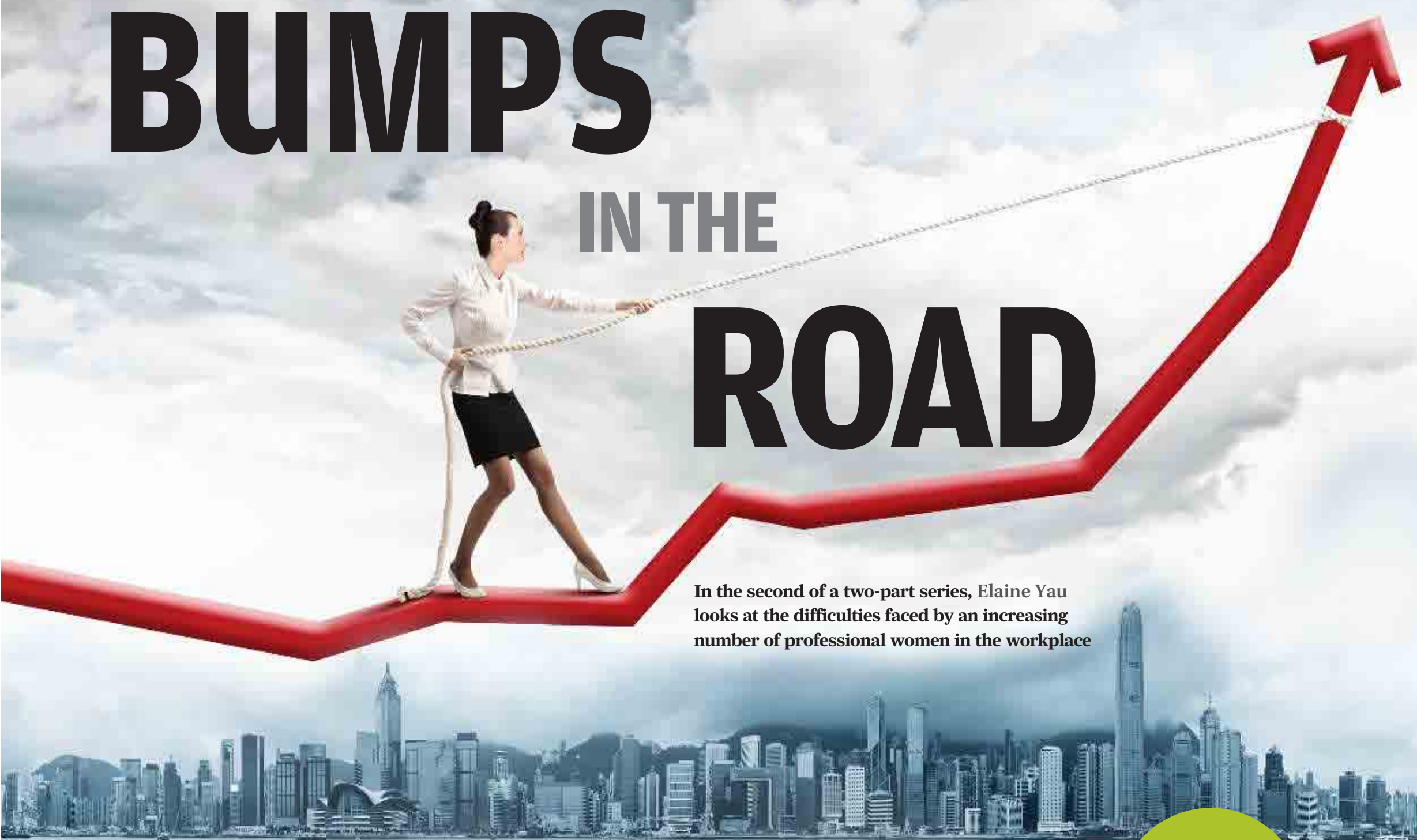
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# BUMPS IN THE ROAD



In the second of a two-part series, Elaine Yau looks at the difficulties faced by an increasing number of professional women in the workplace

**G**ynaecologist Sarah Chan switched to part-time work at a public hospital after she fell pregnant in 2010. She worked on half pay until six months after giving birth to her daughter. The flexible working arrangement helped her ease into motherhood, she says. "I was able to breastfeed my daughter for the first six months," she says.

Such flexibility in the workplace is rare, however. As a result, public-sector doctors and civil servants say, many working mothers find it hard to juggle work and home life. Lately, the problem has been brought to the fore as more women take up professional or senior leadership positions.

While the overall number of males still exceeds that of females in professions such as law and medicine, the number of women opting for such careers might see that change.

The latest figures from the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine show that there are 810 female specialists in Hong Kong aged from 31 to 40, compared to 976 males. Three specialities – anaesthesiology, obstetrics and gynaecology, and paediatrics – employ more female doctors in that age bracket than males.

Hospital Authority (HA) figures meanwhile show that of 5,441 doctors in the public sector last March, 1,980, or 36 per cent were women. That represents a 10 per cent rise from 1,229 in 2004. In the same period there was only a 1.5 per cent rise in the number of male doctors, up from 3,409 to 3,461.

The Department of Health conducted a manpower survey of the 12,176 doctors registered with the Medical Council of Hong Kong in 2012. It showed that the ratio of female to male doctors was 1:2.25, a huge increase from the 1:5.2 a decade earlier.

The same survey showed a similar increase in female practitioners among the 2,053 registered dentists. The ratio of female to male dentists in 2012 was 1:2.31, compared to 1:6.79 in 1982.

Dr Donald Li Kwok-tung, president of the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine, says they have paid close attention to this trend. "Only 10 to 20 per cent of doctors were females in the 80s," he says. "Now it's like 50/50, or even more females than males. Female students are smarter and more of them want to study medicine. In the past, plastic surgeons were all males, now there are females. Paediatrics used to be dominated by males. Now there are more young female paediatricians than males."

The ratio of female doctors and other professionals is likely to grow – a natural progression of women's ascendance in education. Women made up about 60 per cent of the 9,700 students studying medicine, dentistry and health in Hong Kong last year. And they accounted for 53 per cent of students attending the city's eight universities.

With women bearing the responsibility of motherhood, the lack of flexible working arrangements could see female doctors resigning in droves. This could pose a serious problem in future if the proportion of women doctors keeps growing, says Sarah Chan, honorary secretary of the Hong Kong Women Doctors Association.

"There are flexible work arrangements under the HA, like you can ask to work, for example, for only 50 or 75 per cent of the usual working hours and get the corresponding pay. But whether the application gets approved depends on the chief of service in the department of the hospital, who needs to take into account manpower needs," Chan says.

"There are no clear and definite criteria for who will get approval as it's done on a case-by-case basis. A specialist might get approval for a switch to part-time in a hospital. But another specialist in the same department in another hospital might get turned down. Some would rather resign if they can't switch to part time."

Part-timers typically forfeit some benefits, Chan says. "There are more promotion prospects for full-time staff, who have better benefits, like housing allowances,



Photo: Edmond So

**We encourage Hong Kong to follow the example of countries that have introduced the concept of parental leave**

SU-MEI THOMPSON (ABOVE), WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

for example. There is both internal and external recruitment for part-time posts, but most of them are contract-based, unlike permanent posts for full-time staff."

Chan's association is currently in talks with the HA and the Academy of Medicine to provide doctors with specialist training on a part-time basis.

An HA spokesman says the proportion of female doctors working part time has increased in the past 10 years, from 11.9 per cent to 35.5 per cent.

"The HA has been implementing a basket of measures to maintain a family-friendly workplace," the spokesman says. "For pregnant employees, further maternity leave without pay in addition to law may be granted. In August 2011, the HA started exempting pregnant doctors from overnight on-site calls during the advanced

stage of their pregnancy as far as possible. Other measures to reduce the workload of doctors include the recruitment of nonlocal doctors under limited registration to work in HA."

As well as in health care, the ranks of women in the civil service are swelling. Census and Statistics Department figures show that the number of female civil servants at directorate grade rose more than tenfold, from 35 in 1981 to 414 in 2011.

There were 1,257 directorate-level civil servants in 2011. The ratio of males to females was 1:2 that year, compared to 1:19 in 1981. Overall, of the 158,000 civil servants in 2011 35 per cent were females, compared to 25 per cent in 1981.

Leung Chau-tung, chief executive of the Federation of Civil Service Unions, says there's a lack of flexible manpower arrangements in the civil service.

"There's no switch to part-time work possible. You can't work half your usual hours and get half pay, like teachers or doctors under the HA," he says.

"While you can take advance leave, only the chronically ill can take extended leave lasting half a year. If you need to take a break to raise an infant, you have to quit. As more females join the civil service, the lack of flexi work arrangements could pose a serious problem in future."

A Civil Service Bureau spokesman says all civil servants work stipulated hours.

"Individuals may make use of their earned holiday leave for meeting various personal needs," the spokesman said. "Heads of departments may vary the actual hours of attendance of their staff provided that any changes are not likely to impair the efficiency of the departments or the service provided by them to the general public."

"The hours worked must be arranged so that the total hours of attendance by any staff do not fall short of his or her stipulated hours. As a family-friendly practice, the government has been implementing a five-day week since 2006."

Claudia Buchmann, sociology professor in the Ohio State

University, who co-authored *The Rise of Women*, says: "As women enter elite professions in greater numbers, gender stereotypes about the kinds of jobs women and men are best suited for will erode slowly, but surely ... they may be able to rally for more flexible and family-friendly policies in these professions."

"If workplaces do not recognise the needs of their workers, both mothers and fathers, to have flexible working conditions or to provide quality day care and preschool for children they will definitely not be able to retain their talent and worker productivity may decline."

Su-Mei Thompson, CEO of the Women's Foundation, says:

"While it is encouraging to see increasing numbers of women earning degrees in traditionally male-dominated fields, in our experience gender disparities are negligible at the entry level, where roles are filled at almost a 50:50 ratio, and women are climbing up the career ladder during those early years as quickly as men. The attrition problem begins in middle management around the time

when women find themselves conflicted between career and family responsibilities."

The focus of companies has so far been on how to allow women to do both – by protecting their jobs during maternity leave and providing flexible working arrangements, she says. But the effect has been to entrench women even more firmly in their role as the primary caregivers.

"We would like to see a revolution in how as a society we approach parenting responsibilities," Thompson says. "We encourage the Hong Kong government to follow the example of countries like the UK, which have introduced the concept of 'parental leave' whereby spouses can choose which one of them takes time off work to care for children."

Thompson says that with Hong Kong's rapidly ageing population, the government and private sector should consider the often hidden burden of care for elderly relatives that is

60%

of medicine, dentistry and health students in Hong Kong last year were women

shouldered by female employees, and introduce, for example, elderly care leave days and greater support for women who have to care for elderly parents and parents-in-law.

Professor Paul Yip Siu-fai, a demographics expert at the University of Hong Kong, says the government should come up with measures in its population policy to help women remain in the workforce.

"Females bring more sensitivity and understanding to a workplace. Their presence can complement their male colleagues," he says. "The overall work participation rate drops for women who are of marriage and childbearing age. Once they leave the workforce, it's difficult for them to rejoin the labour market. Overseas countries have longer maternity leave and unpaid leave. The government should roll out more flexible work measures to ensure that women are not shut out of the workforce."

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Three speciality areas of medicine – anaesthesiology, obstetrics and gynaecology, and paediatrics – employ more female doctors in the 31 to 40 age bracket than males. Photo: Dickson Lee