Gender empowerment and career development: a comparative study of women's vocational training policies in Shanghai, the UK, and Hong Kong

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Abstract. This study focuses on women's vocational training policies and systematically compares differences in policy objectives, implementation mechanisms, gender responsiveness, and social outcomes across Shanghai, the UK, and Hong Kong through textual analysis and empirical comparison. The findings reveal three key trends: Shanghai's policies prioritize adaptability to new employment forms and migrant women's needs; the UK faces structural challenges of gendered occupational segregation; and Hong Kong uses flexible mechanisms to address the balance between family care and employment. Based on these insights, the study proposes a women's training policy system centered on demand precision, mechanism flexibility, and gender mainstreaming to support migrant women's career development.

Keywords: vocational training, gender equality, migrant women, policy comparison

1. Introduction

Against the dual transitions of globalization and digitalization, women's career development has become one of the core indicators for measuring social inclusivity and economic vitality. Data from the International Labour Organization [8] shows that the global female labor force participation rate is 20 percentage points lower than that of men, and insufficient vocational training is a key factor driving this gap. Women without systematic training have 35% lower employment stability and can face a wage gap of up to 28% compared with those who receive training.

In China, Shanghai serves as a core city in the Yangtze River Delta economic circle and a major destination for migrant populations. By 2024, the scale of its migrant population had reached 9.73 million, with women accounting for 68.2%. These women are mainly concentrated in three sectors: services (45%), manufacturing (32%), and new employment forms such as online delivery and domestic services (23%) [13]. These migrant women not only face practical needs for skill-job matching but also bear the dual responsibilities of supporting family finances and integrating into urban society. The effectiveness of their vocational training directly impacts the achievement of Shanghai's goal of building an "inclusive employment system" outlined in its 14th Five-Year Plan [11].

Meanwhile, practices in women's vocational training vary significantly across different economies. As an early adopter of gender equality policies among EU member states (with policy frameworks retaining some EU standards post-Brexit), the UK has incorporated "narrowing the gendered occupational gap" into its National Skills Strategy (2022). However, long-term influences from industrial traditions and market mechanisms mean that women's participation rate in high-level skill training (such as engineering and information technology) is only one-third that of men. The issue of gender bias in public training fund allocation has yet to be fundamentally resolved [14].

Hong Kong, leveraging its "small government, big society" governance model, has closely linked women's vocational training to demands in people's livelihood sectors such as caregiving and education amid aging and low fertility rates. Through a closed-loop design of "training-employment-protection," Hong Kong has increased the re-employment rate of women who receive training by 47% compared with those who do not [5].

Existing studies mostly focus on single regions or single policy dimensions (such as subsidy standards and curriculum design). They lack systematic comparisons of women's training policies across different social systems and demographic structures, especially overlooking the uniqueness of "development-oriented needs" among Shanghai's migrant women—needs that differ from the "rights-oriented needs" of women in the UK and "balance-oriented needs" of women in Hong Kong.

Building on the core proposition of Effect Evaluation and Optimization Paths of Vocational Training Policies for Migrant Women in Shanghai, this study constructs a four-dimensional comparative framework covering policy objectives, implementation mechanisms, gender responsiveness, and social outcomes. It systematically analyzes the strengths and limitations of policies in Shanghai, the UK, and Hong Kong, aiming to provide cross-regional references for addressing issues such as "demand mismatch," "resource shortage," and "support deficiency" in migrant women's training. It also enriches the comparative research paradigm of vocational training policies from a gender perspective.

2. Analysis of women's vocational training policy frameworks across three regions

2.1. Shanghai: policy exploration for migrant orientation and adaptation to new employment forms

Shanghai's policies center on the Employment Promotion Regulations and form a framework of policy guidance, enterprise participation, and subsidy incentives. To address the new employment forms where migrant women are concentrated, Shanghai issued Document No. 1 [2022] of the Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau (SMHRSSB) in 2022. This document requires the establishment of a "skills demand catalog" and the development of digital courses such as drone logistics operation and smart warehousing [12].

However, field surveys identify three contradictions in policy implementation. First, there is a demand mismatch: migrant women workers in Jiading District urgently need advanced skills such as English and management, but existing training still focuses on traditional occupations (Eastday, n.d.). Second, resources are insufficient: courses tailored to new occupations like online delivery workers are scarce, and there is a shortage of professional instructors. Third, access barriers exist: preconditions for subsidies such as social security contributions exclude some women in flexible employment [12].

2.2. The UK: structural challenges under gender equality goals

The UK's vocational training policies are deeply influenced by the European Social Fund but exhibit obvious "gender reconstruction" characteristics. They prioritize funding for traditional male-dominated skill training while neglecting women's needs for career advancement and new technical skills [10]. A gender budget analysis of Scotland's Modern Apprenticeship Programme shows that men hold 67% of high-level training places, while women are concentrated in low-level programs. This leads to a 32% gender gap in public training investment [1].

Historical research indicates that even in traditional industrial sectors, women's vocational training can help accumulate social capital but rarely breaks the glass ceiling. For example, women in the coal industry still face promotion restrictions after receiving training [9]. In recent years, lifecycle-based studies have confirmed that targeted training can narrow the gender wage gap by 19%, yet policy implementation still lacks flexible support for women in the child-rearing period [2].

2.3. Hong Kong: a practical model combining flexibility and precision

Hong Kong has established a two-tier system relying on the Labour Department and the Employees Retraining Board (ERB). The Labour Department provides part-time job-adapted training through the "Middle-Aged Employment Programme," which helped 1,701 women secure employment in 2017 (accounting for 64.4% of total beneficiaries) [6].

The ERB promotes flexible models such as installment-based training with cumulative completion and the hire-first-train-later approach, allowing women to split courses according to their family care needs. In 2020, it increased the training subsidy for the caregiving industry to HKD 24,000 per person [3].

Hong Kong's distinctive mechanisms include three key elements. First, qualification articulation: caregiving training is linked to diploma programs at institutions such as the University of Hong Kong, enabling a smooth connection of "training-certification-promotion" [4]. Second, employer incentives: enterprises that hire trained women can receive a monthly subsidy of up to HKD 2,000 per employee. Third, service integration: the "Lohas Station" platform provides one-stop services covering training and employment [7].

3. A multi-dimensional framework for policy comparison across three regions

Table 1. Policy comparison across three regions

Dimension	Shanghai	The UK	Hong Kong
Policy Objectives	Adaptation to new employment forms + urban integration (SMHRSSB, 2025)	Gender equality + skill upgrading (Rubery, n.d.)	Employment promotion + work-family balance (HKSAR, 2020a)
Implementation Mechanisms	Government-led + enterprise collaboration (SMHRSSB, 2025)	Fund support + market regulation (Browne & Misra, 2017)	Statutory institutions + social participation (Hong Kong Labour Department, n.d.)
Gender Responsiveness	Migrant women as implicit targets (Eastday, n.d.)	Explicit gender budget analysis (Browne & Misra, 2017)	Targeted design for care needs (HKSAR, 2020b)
Subsidy Model	Class-hour subsidies (approximately CNY 30 per class hour) (SMHRSSB, 2025)	Project-based funding (Rubery, n.d.)	Dual subsidies for employers and trainees (HKSAR, 2020a)
Core Challenges	Demand mismatch + access barriers (Eastday, n.d.)	Occupational segregation + uneven investment (Ginn, 2019)	Lagging digital courses (Hong Kong Women's Commission, 2022)

4. Specificity and optimization paths of vocational training for migrant women

4.1. Re-recognizing the specificity of migrant women in Shanghai

Compared with the gendered occupational segregation faced by UK women [9] and the care responsibilities of Hong Kong women [4], migrant women in Shanghai demonstrate "development-oriented needs." Among post-80s migrant women workers, 71.4% cite "learning skills" and "self-development" as their migration goals, rather than mere subsistence [15].

Their specificity manifests in three aspects. First, their skill needs are compound: they require both basic digital skills and advanced capabilities in management and entrepreneurship. Second, they have high cost sensitivity: groups with a monthly income of CNY 1,000–3,000 cannot afford high training fees. Third, they lack social support: 42% experience psychological stress such as loneliness, which affects the continuity of their training [15].

4.2. Integrated optimization paths drawing on three regions' experiences

4.2.1. Building a precise demand response mechanism

Drawing on Hong Kong's hire-first-train-later model [3], Shanghai can collaborate with food delivery platforms and domestic service companies to develop job-customized training. In line with the spirit of Document No. 17 [2022] of the SMHRSSB, the eligibility criteria for subsidies can be adjusted from "social security contributions" to "job commitment" [12]. It is recommended to release a White Paper on Migrant Women's Skill Needs quarterly, with a focus on developing integrated courses in e-commerce operations and smart caregiving.

4.2.2. Improving gender mainstreaming policy tools

The UK's gender budget analysis method [1] can be introduced to conduct gender audits of Shanghai's training fund allocation, ensuring that women account for no less than 60% of beneficiaries. For women in the child-rearing period, flexible class hour models from Hong Kong [4] can serve as a reference to develop blended online-offline courses, supplemented by child care subsidies.

4.2.3. Strengthening the construction of social support systems

An integrated platform covering "training-certification-integration" should be built. Skill certification can be linked to residence permit points (e.g., 5–10 points for certificate holders). The subsidy distribution process can be optimized with reference to Shanghai's "One-Stop Service Platform" to enable instant online applications [12]. Community learning communities should be established, with career mentors and psychological counselors assigned to alleviate the psychological stress of migrant women.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Core findings and summary of differences

Through a four-dimensional comparison of women's vocational training policies in Shanghai, the UK, and Hong Kong, this study reveals differences in policy design logic and practical effects across different social contexts.

Shanghai's policies focus on "adaptation to new employment forms" and have strengths in developing digital courses and promoting enterprise collaboration. However, the positioning of migrant women as "implicit targets" leads to insufficient precision in demand identification and inadequate social support. Institutional designs such as social security thresholds further limit policy coverage [12,15].

The UK's policies take "gender equality" as an explicit goal and use tools like gender budget analysis to enhance transparency in resource allocation. Nevertheless, path dependence on industrial traditions and market mechanisms means the issue of gender segregation in high-level skill training remains unresolved. There is also a clear shortage of flexible support systems for women in the child-rearing period [1,2].

Hong Kong's policies center on "work-family balance." Flexible mechanisms such as installment-based training and qualification articulation effectively address the dual needs of women's care responsibilities and career development. However, updates to digital courses lag behind industrial changes, making it difficult to meet the skill needs of women in new employment forms [3,7].

Notably, the "development-oriented needs" of Shanghai's migrant women—with 71.4% targeting "skill acquisition and development"—differ significantly from the "rights-oriented needs" of UK women (focused on fair gender resource allocation) and "balance-oriented needs" of Hong Kong women (focused on work-family coordination). This group characteristic means Shanghai's policy optimization must make simultaneous efforts in three dimensions: precise demand identification, reducing participation costs, and strengthening social integration. It cannot simply replicate the UK's gender budget tools or Hong Kong's flexible training models.

5.2. Theoretical significance and practical implications

Theoretically, this study expands the comparative research framework of vocational training policies from a gender perspective. First, it proposes a "demand type-policy response" matching model for the first time. It confirms that different types of women's needs (development-oriented, rights-oriented, balance-oriented) require differentiated policy design logics, breaking the limitation of previous "single-dimension comparison" studies. Second, it reveals the interaction mechanism of "institutional environment-group characteristics-policy effects." For example, Shanghai's "government-led" institutional environment facilitates large-scale policy promotion but requires market collaboration to improve demand response precision. The UK's "market-led" environment needs stronger government intervention to address gender segregation. These insights provide theoretical boundaries for policy learning across different institutional contexts.

Practically, the findings offer direct references for Shanghai and other mainland cities with large migrant populations (such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen). First, a tripartite demand survey mechanism involving government, enterprises, and society should be established. Quarterly surveys on migrant women's skill needs should be conducted in collaboration with industry associations and community service centers, and advanced needs such as "English communication" and "entrepreneurial management" should be included in the curriculum development catalog. Second, a "flexible subsidy" system should be implemented: migrant women with a monthly income below CNY 3,000 should be exempted from training fees, and the social security contribution requirement should be adjusted to a "commitment to employment within six months after training" to expand policy coverage. Third, a "training-certification-integration" closed loop should be built: vocational skill certification should be linked to residence permit points and children's education rights. Meanwhile, "migrant women's learning communities" should be set up in communities, with career mentors and psychological counselors assigned to alleviate the loneliness and other psychological stress experienced by 42% of this group [15].

5.3. Research limitations and future directions

This study has two limitations. First, in terms of data timeliness, adjustments to the UK's vocational training policies post-Brexit (2020 onwards)—such as changes to fund allocation mechanisms after exiting the European Social Fund—have not been fully incorporated into the analysis and require follow-up updates. Second, in terms of comparison dimensions, long-term evaluations of policy effects (such as the career promotion rate and salary growth of trained women five years later) are not included, making it difficult to fully measure the sustainable impact of policies.

Future research can be deepened in three directions. First, cross-country longitudinal studies should be conducted to compare the dynamic adjustments of women's training policies in comparable cities—such as Shanghai and London, Hong Kong and

Singapore. These studies can analyze how the interaction between globalization and localization affects policy effects. Second, research should focus on sub-groups of migrant women, such as "migrant women in the child-rearing period" and "migrant women in new employment forms," to conduct targeted policy effect evaluations. Third, quantitative research methods should be introduced. Through questionnaires and in-depth interviews, a regression model of "demand satisfaction-policy satisfaction-career development effectiveness" can be constructed to provide more precise empirical support for policy optimization.

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