

merdeka focus

Raising the participation of women in the workforce

For every 13 female graduates in the country, there are 10 males. Yet women only represent 37% of the skilled workforce in the country. And as the war for talent intensifies, Malaysia is finding that it can ill afford to lose its women.

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

A few years ago, management consultancy McKinsey & Co surveyed 77 companies all over the US, Asia and Europe across a spectrum of industries and concluded that over the next 20 years, the most important corporate resource would be talent — smart, sophisticated businesspeople who are technologically literate, globally astute and operationally agile. In fact, talent has trumped capital, strategy or R&D in the hierarchy of corporate needs.

But as the demand rises, the supply falls. And this is why Malaysia cannot afford to let its highly educated women quit their jobs to take care of their children.

JobStreet.com country manager Chook Yuh Yng says that when the Internet recruitment website did a survey on women in the workforce last year, about 64% of them said they expect their career goals to change after having children.

What would their career priorities be, post-children? Some 61% said flexible working hours while 16% claimed they would settle for shorter and fixed working hours. Some 44% said they planned to stop working after having children, but most were unable to as they still needed the money.

"If we want them back in the workforce, we have to look at their pain points. What actually stops them from going back to work? I think firstly, a lot of them want to take care of their children. I'm a new mother so I can really understand that," says Chook, who has an eight-month-old son.

She says many new mothers find it difficult to concentrate on their work once they get back from maternity leave. "So unless you have a very good child support system, your priority will always be split. It is difficult to keep working with peace of mind if you're always worrying about 'what ifs'."

And Chook thinks that maternity leave in Malaysia is way too short. "I would think it's the shortest in the world. Even our kiasu neighbour has four months and in the UK, you can take up to a year of unpaid leave. These are places that have recognised the need for women. It's the comfort of knowing that if you leave your work for one year and then you come back, you can still pick up where you left off."

The civil service has extended its maternity leave to three months, but the labour laws have not been amended to the effect. "I think it's important to legislate the increase in maternity leave or you hope that companies will do it."

For every senior woman who leaves because of childbirth, the cost of replacement is three times her salary.

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And in knowledge-based companies, that can go up to five times. So companies are starting to find ways to keep their top female talent, one of which involves flexible working arrangements.

PwC Malaysia partner Pauline Ho says the accounting firm, for one, has introduced these working arrangements, and not just for women. "People can opt for flexible working arrangements. They can take a career break."

Recently, at Invest Malaysia, it was announced that beginning 2013, employers would be given a double tax deduction incentive for training expenditure incurred by companies re-employing women professionals on a career break.

Ho, however, has some reservations about this. "For those who actually go away for five years and decide they want to come back and be a full-time auditor, I think it will be very tough. A lot of standards will have changed and there will be such a steep learning curve. You wouldn't be able to come up to speed with just a two-week training programme."

What she suggests instead, is that if the woman has an interest to come back to work, she attends trainings whenever there is a change in standards. "So you keep the job for this person and they will be trained and updated throughout the period, so when they come, it's very natural. It's important to keep yourself relevant and not just be given one incentive before you come back."

JobStreet's Chook thinks that a lot more infrastructures need to be put in place before you can allow anyone to take a career break with impunity. "It's not as simple as it sounds. Many times, companies are not properly organised and if someone goes on a sabbatical, someone else will need to be trained or hired to take over the position. So you need to look at succession planning, job rotation and the ability of other people to step in. It needs a lot of thought in the organisation planning as well."

Malaysia was ranked No 97 in the Gender Gap Index last year, an improvement from 98 the year before. In terms of economic participation, it did slightly better at 95. Not bad, but not good by a long shot and still indicative of a long way to go.

Ho points out that in PwC, however, the Malaysian office is one of the best in terms of women in senior positions. Some 36% of its partners are female. "That's a very good average if you talk to my colleagues overseas. They would be amazed and ask, 'How did you do it?' We don't have any specific policies to add more female partners. I think it's just that everyone's given equal opportunities."

However, if you were to dig a little deeper another picture emerges. Some 64% of the managers are women, and

41% of the directors. "How does 64 become 41 and then become 36? It's because there are a lot of people who drop out along the way. Therefore, we are not happy that we are still losing a lot of good female talent. We are never happy about losing talent, whether male or female," Ho hastens to add.

Case in point: Ho recently had a discussion with one of her managers in her twenties who said she would have to quit as she was getting married because she did not think this was a career that would allow her to get married and have children.

"I said, 'Hello, look at your partners; most of them are married with children. So why do you say that?' And she said, there are different expectations from her husband-to-be and her future in-laws. They wanted her to have more steady working hours and not to be too successful in case she overshadows her husband," she says.

Ho rolls her eyes. "So I suggested that she transfer to Internal Firm Services and then when things are more stable at home and she wants to come back, she can. She said she would think about it. I see that as very sad. It's not like she doesn't like what she's doing. And she's doing quite well."

Ho thinks part of the reason women drop out of the workforce is that they try to live up to all these external expectations. "We set our own boundaries and we make our own lives difficult."

When she had just given birth to her triplet boys six years ago, Ho was guilty of the same thing. "I put a lot of stress on myself trying to be the best mother by the definitions of my mother, my father-in-law and my husband. That was just too tough. In the end, everyone accepted that I would still want a career. Those are the communications that have to happen. So now I have basically set up a support system at home so that things that need to be done will be done."

And no, she does not feel guilty about it. "I think my children would prefer to have a mum who's happy than a mum who's unhappy because I know if I stay home and work I'd be an extremely unhappy person."

Childcare then, is a major issue. Chook says she is lucky to have a good childcare support system. "If I didn't, I know how much pain and trouble it can be. I know the Ministry of Women [Family and Community Development] is trying to provide incentives to companies which set up childcare centres within the premises but it's not that easy. It's not only about assigning a room to put your babies in. It's about maintaining the place and having trained personnel, which is a business in itself and not something that's easily done by small and medium-sized companies."

Steps have to be put in place to address this issue on a national rather than ad-hoc level. "We need world-class training and courses to create a pool of professionals to work at these childcare centres. At the moment, it's more of a household thing and not at all professionally run, but not cheap either. So a lot of women tend to stay back and raise the child themselves. Lacking the support system, this becomes their priority," Chook points out.

And what do we lose? "When you look at the enrolment and graduation rate, there is something like 60% of women graduating compared with men. It's such a shame that we are losing so many of these women. This is the talent we want to retain. A lot of MNCs have already introduced working arrangements such as working part time or on certain days a week, working from home or flexible working hours to retain their women. Unfortunately, most Malaysian companies are not ready to follow suit. So it is something that we can work towards," she says.

Basically, Chook adds, keeping women in the workforce is no longer a nice-to-have, but a necessity. "Sooner or later, companies will have to learn that there's a lot of competition out there for good talent. It's very expensive to keep going out and hiring and every time you do, you have to put up with a lack of productivity as a new person is trained for the job. If you retain your staff, this can be avoided."

Malaysia is moving in the right direction. "We are quite a way behind but we are moving forward. You've got to start somewhere," she concludes.



HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE