

Mind shift needed to make room at the top for women

Forum told retaining women in workplace should be seen as a business issue rather than a female issue

by AZLI JAMIL

EMPLOYER'S mind shift is essential to enable women to progress in the workplace, where flexi work should be reviewed and the mentorship and sponsorship programmes should be formulated to better address its diversity.

The above point and that of retaining women in the workplace should be seen as a business issue rather than a female issue were some of the consensus reached at a panel discussion organised by the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) titled: "Women Rising To The Top — What's Holding You Back?" in Kuala Lumpur last Friday.

"Malaysia has 47% women participation in the workforce and that is the lowest rate in South-East Asia!" said Talent Corp Malaysia Bhd CEO Johan Mahmood Merican. Johan added that there are problems on retaining women in the workforce as they may opt to not return to work after maternity. He added that to grow the number organically will be impossible.



Pic by Muhd Amin Naharul

(From left) Moderator and Garang Pictures executive producer Low Ngai Yuen, GE Malaysia & Brunei HR director Sugunah, TalentCorp CEO Johan and PwC Malaysia senior ED Chin at the forum last Friday

Another panelist, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) senior ED Chin Sui Fang, said that women should be looked at not only as employees but also as consumers with the purchasing power and knowledge on what the market wants.

She qualified her statement with an example on how having women help companies better plan strategies to address half the workforce that also represent consumers. General Electric International Inc (GE) Malaysia & Brunei Human Resource (HR) director Sugunah Verumandy championed the importance of flexi work in addressing the diversity of having

new mothers returning to work. She related her company's experience and stressed the importance of enablers such as proper human capital framework within the organisation. "This is an emotive topic. I have never been a fan of quota as it measures quantity rather than quality," said Chin.

She added that having a 30% target in 2016 focuses the mind somewhat, saying that all initiatives to reach the target has to be done in tandem.

"Whether you call it target or quota, it is always great to have aspirations," said Sugunah. She said that numbers alone is insufficient as it should

be tied with quality. "That is why the mentoring or sponsorship programme need to happen in order to fulfill the aspirations," she said.

In a similar event in late March 2013, *The Malaysian Reserve* reported that professional women in financial services think affirmative action is crucial for them to advance in the sector, but only if companies provide opportunities voluntarily. The Malaysian government introduced a policy in June 2011 that will ensure at least 30% women representation at senior decision-making and boardroom level in Malaysian companies by 2016.