

Not just for 'aunties' - Women's groups woo younger set.

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Ad hoc membership, courses for younger women and a school outreach programme aimed at boys as well as girls, are among ways to attract new blood and raise awareness.

RENEWAL is the game now in women's groups here, from Unifem Singapore with its school outreach programme, to the People's Association's women's executive committees which are updating their 'auntie' image. They are making concerted efforts to attract new blood and fresh ideas to energise their organisations and to ensure their ethos lives on.

Leading the way is the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), the umbrella body for 47 women's groups, representing about 150,000 women in all. SCWO president Jennifer Lee said bringing in women members in their 20s and 30s is a priority this year.

'We want to have all voices heard, all views represented,' she said.

On the same quest is the Women Integration Network Council, which oversees the 104 women's executive committees (WECs) based in community centres. They have 1,600 executive and 48,000 ordinary members, mostly between 40 and 59.

Younger input is especially important to the WECs, which collect feedback on government policies such as the baby bonus scheme that directly affect young women.

'If as a large women's organisation we don't give feedback to the Government and tell it what we need, it would be a wasted opportunity,' said council chairman Ling-Saw Wei Ying.

The committees, which in the 1960s ran life-skills courses such as cooking and tailoring classes, now organise information technology classes, floral arrangement courses and parenting talks, which draw a younger crowd.

Mrs Ling-Saw is toying with ad hoc membership, to let increasingly mobile young women become members for flexible periods to handle short-term projects.

Unifem Singapore, the local chapter of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, whose members are mostly between 30 and 50 years old, is targeting even younger people. It is starting an outreach programme in schools this year, to spread the word on development issues facing women in the region.

Said Unifem Singapore's president Melissa Kwee: 'We want to expose boys and girls to the fact that we still have a long way to go in promoting a better life for women in developing countries. Even the 88-year-old Chinese Women's Association, which runs a senior citizens' home and day-care centre, is bent on rejuvenation. Its oldest members are in their 90s.

Said its first vice-president, Mrs Eva Lee: 'We want young women involved, so that they're aware of issues of ageing too.' There are other reasons for attracting younger women.

Said Mrs Constance Singam, former president of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware): 'Many young women tell me feminism is not relevant anymore, but there are still so many issues to grapple with, especially since it's their lives we are talking about.' Even as the groups seek new blood, they value experience as much as energy.

Aware president Tisa Ng said: 'We're proud that our executive committee includes some founding members.' Aware's committee members are in their 20s to 60s.

She added: 'We have a spread of views and are conscious of different needs.'