

The Straits Times

Singapore

Call to do more to help women workers

Alvin Foo & Melissa Tan

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Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports Yu-Foo Yee Shoon (fifth from right) posing with delegates and participants at yesterday's closing ceremony. Mrs Yu-Foo said she was pleased that the recommendations made promoted a total approach. -- ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

Many of them hold informal jobs and layoffs go unnoticed by govts

REGIONAL leaders were urged to do more to deal with the economic risks women are facing, given that many hold informal and vulnerable jobs that are being shed in the downturn.

THE PROPOSALS

THE 10 policy recommendations which will be proposed to the Apec leaders:

Strengthen capacity-building programmes, including education and vocational skills training for women

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Job losses for women working in the informal sector could go unnoticed by policymakers, said the United Nations Under-Secretary-General Noeleen Heyzer yesterday at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Women Leaders Network Meeting here. The two-day gathering ended yesterday with a list of 10 recommendations made to the Apec leaders.

Informal employment refers to paid work without a formal job contract.

'Seventy per cent of job losses in Asia are in fact in the informal sector,' noted Dr Heyzer. 'Asia-Pacific has the second-highest ratio of employed women of working age in the world, at 49 per cent.' She added that women constitute the majority of low-skilled workers in labour-intensive manufacturing industries such as textiles, apparel and electronics.

As such, 'women have emerged as the flexible labour force par excellence', she said. 'However, their entry into the workforce has also coincided with trends towards outsourcing and sub-contracting.'

Another speaker, Ms Ines Alberdi, executive director of the UN Development Fund for Women (Unifem), said on Tuesday that over 80 per cent of the female labour force in Asia is in informal

work. 'These are the losses that do not show up in unemployment figures - and so are neglected in stimulus measures,' she said.

Dr Heyzer agreed, saying: 'This is something that's not spoken about; or it's not as visible and it can be easily forgotten.' And for informal sector workers, 'their poverty only deepens when formal sector workers switch to the informal economy during times of crisis, depressing the wages of the informal economy'.

Noting that women were an untapped resource in Apec economies, Dr Heyzer called for 'a much deeper transformation and much deeper reforms... in a more inclusive way'. She added that one way to improve the lot of women over the long term was to increase their access to education and training.

She noted up to US\$17 billion (S\$24 billion) was lost across the region every year due to gender gaps in education and over US\$42 billion was lost from restricting women's access to decent employment.

Speakers at a workshop on Women In The Knowledge Economy elaborated on education and training for women, saying information and communication technology would place women in a better position for success.

At another workshop, a panel of five leaders reflected on the pressures women face at work. Some said national or company policies that offer work-life balance will come to naught without supportive bosses and work culture.

For example, taking leave for family reasons might be considered a stigma, said Ms Teresa Lim, managing director of IBM Singapore. This might discourage employees from taking the leave and render company work-life policies ineffective.

Another workshop discussed the merits of social enterprises to help women and youth escape the poverty trap.

Filipino businesswoman Pacita Juan shared how she started ECHOstore, which helps marginalised women - from prisoners to illiterate villagers - sell their goods and crafts in a retail store.

Singaporean entrepreneur Elim Chew, who started fashion chain 77th Street, also shared her goal of helping youth. For instance, she has asked shopping centres to give retail space for disadvantaged youth to sell their products so they can be more self-sufficient.

Overall, Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, the Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports, was pleased the recommendations promoted a total approach involving the public, private and people sectors.

'These partnerships enable women to leverage on info-communications technology, to harmonise their work and family life, to achieve both their career as well as familial aspirations,' she said.

The next women leaders meeting will be held in Japan in September next year.

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Additional reporting by Sue-Ann Chia and Cai Haoxiang

Singapore

More women at the top means 'more profit'

Alvin Foo

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Companies benefit from better gender mix, say speakers at Apec meeting

THERE is a growing realisation in the business world that women have a special quality and a role to play in the boardroom, noted Singapore's Ambassador to the United States Chan Heng Chee yesterday.

The economic crisis has given women fresh opportunities, and there is compelling evidence that may benefit them in the long run, said Professor Chan in her keynote address at the Apec Women Leaders Network meeting.

'The explanation given was that women did not seem to take unnecessary risks. They do well over time; they do not make big money but neither do they lose big money.'

She cited a Washington Post article which reported that accounting firm Ernst & Young released findings recently that companies with more women in senior management roles make more money.

She also mentioned a Pepperdine University study which revealed that Fortune 500 firms with the best records of putting women at the top were 18 per cent to 69 per cent more profitable than the average companies in their industries.

'Economists at Davos this year speculated that the presence of more women on Wall Street might have averted the downturn,' she added.

Other speakers yesterday also highlighted the growing significance of women in business. 'Companies with a stronger mix of women and men in their management tend to have a 48 per cent higher average earnings before tax than the industry norm,' said Ms Kirsten Sayers, Australia's senior trade and investment commissioner to Singapore.

One oft-mentioned topic was the challenges women faced in the corporate world and how these could be resolved.

One issue is employers questioning women's commitment to their careers because of the assumption that they will be getting married and starting families.

Prof Chan said this mindset has to change due to a manpower shortage and women proving the conventional belief wrong.

'Employers should not see women taking time off to get married and have children as a deviation from the norm,' she said.

Women in the Apec community have played a key role in the region's economic success, said Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports Yu-Foo Yee Shoon.

She noted studies that show as much as 40 per cent to 45 per cent of the total female population in some Apec economies such as Peru and Thailand are business owners.

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ASIAN NEWS PAPER OF THE YEAR

Singapore

Four exceptional female leaders in Apec

285 words

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PROFESSOR Chan Heng Chee highlighted these four women in her keynote address:

CHILEAN PRESIDENT MICHELLE BACHELET

She was elected Chile's first woman President in 2006.

Why? 'It was reported that President Bachelet has made a point of trying to maintain a home life as much as possible with her three children. One incident cited is that when her daughter fell gravely ill, she diagnosed her daughter, drove her to hospital and stayed by her bedside till the danger passed.'

FORMER CHINESE DEPUTY PREMIER WU YI

Considered by Forbes to be the world's second-most powerful woman in 2004, 2005 and 2007. She was known as China's Iron Lady for her toughness in trade talks.

Why? 'Wu Yi is recognised as one of the most able international negotiators of China and a trouble-shooter. Time magazine called her the 'Goddess of Transparency' for her leadership during the Sars crisis.'

SRI MULYANI INDRAWATI, INDONESIA'S MINISTER OF FINANCE

She was ranked the 23rd most powerful woman by Forbes magazine in 2008. She was named Finance Minister of the Year by The Banker in 2007.

Why? 'Sri Mulyani is recognised for having steered her country through the global economic crisis and focused seriously on economic reform.'

INDRA NOOYI, CHAIRMAN AND CEO, FOOD AND DRINKS MANUFACTURER PEPSICO

Born into a Tamil family in India, she is married and has two daughters.

Why? 'Fortune Magazine named her No. 1 in its annual ranking of the most powerful women in business for 2006, 2007 and 2008. Indra Nooyi has said (to) US News and World Report that 'after Pepsico, I do want to go to Washington. I want to give back!'

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ASIA'S LEADING NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

Singapore

S'pore made most gains in region

Melissa Tan

388 words

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WOMEN in Singapore have set a faster pace than their regional counterparts in gaining a place in the political process, said the World Bank's director of gender and development.

Ms Mayra Buvinic told the Apec Women Leaders Network meeting yesterday: 'The country that has made the most gains in the last decade...in political participation actually has been Singapore, in terms of parliamentary representation.'

Singapore has 22 female MPs in its 94-seat Parliament - about a fivefold rise from the 1980s, when there were just four women out of 84 MPs.

Ms Buvinic called for more women in politics, noting that in all Apec countries, less than 35 per cent of their political offices were held by women.

The issue of increasing female participation in politics was raised several times during the day.

Singapore's Ambassador to the United States, Professor Chan Heng Chee, said in her keynote address: 'Today, more women are seeking elected office and more are entering their countries' legislatures.'

But she noted that women in East Asia and the Pacific were under-represented politically compared with other regions. For instance, in East Asia and the Pacific, an average of 11 per cent of parliamentary positions are held by women - less than sub-Saharan Africa's 16 per cent and an average 26 per cent in developed countries.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that Singapore is 'no longer bottom of league tables' in terms of female representation in politics but can still do better.

He said that the Government hoped to bring in more women progressively, adding that female MPs participate actively in debate on all issues, and not just those of interest to women.

The PM said women could bring a different perspective to discussions of national concern, especially on issues like education and sustainable development: 'It's a perspective which is forward-looking because the women have children and they think for their children into the next generation.'

Speakers agreed, however, that politics was still a difficult career for women. Said Prof Chan: 'They are certainly more closely scrutinised and commented on in a most personal way. With a woman politician, hair, clothing, general looks and age are considered fair targets. Rarely is a man given the same third-degree inspection.'

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ASIAN MEDIA AWARDS WINNER OF THE YEAR

Singapore

The proposals

164 words

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THE 10 policy recommendations which will be proposed to the Apec leaders:

Strengthen capacity-building programmes, including education and vocational skills training for women

Promote employment generation programmes to level up women, particularly those in informal and vulnerable sectors

Ensure access to financing, especially for micro and small enterprises

Secure social safety nets for women

Simplify business registration and operational processes

Promote the use of science and technology as an enabler and leveller for women

Facilitate access to information communication technology, especially for rural and indigenous women, through the provision of services, equipment and technological literacy training

Encourage public-private partnerships, including civil society, as a viable approach in furthering the contributions of women to the economy

Support social enterprise as a business model for women and sustainable development

Recognise the economic and social value of supporting, investing and promoting programmes and measures relating to environmental issues such as climate change, and work-life initiatives such as childcare and caregiver support

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Prime News

PM's concern: Young, educated women not having babies

Goh Chin Lian, Senior Political Correspondent

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Education has given them a bigger role but has changed aspirations

YOUNG, well-educated women are posing a new challenge to Singapore in its continual effort to tackle its baby woes.

Their desire to advance their careers, be leaders in society, enjoy life and see the world can get in the way of their desire to get married and start families, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday.

'By the time they have dealt with all the other pressing priorities...it may be too late and too difficult,' he told more than 600 people attending an international women's meeting.

'The clock is ticking,' he added, in a speech which also noted that Singapore has not fully harnessed its woman power in the labour force.

'If you look at our labour force participation, you have a single-hump camel,' he said, noting that women workers tend to leave the workforce after they have children.

'In other countries, you have a second hump because after the children go to school, the women come back to work again.'

He added: 'We have been working hard and I can see the beginning of a second hump, but we have to work harder.'

Mr Lee was speaking at a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Women Leaders Network, a two-day event for gathering proposals to present in November, when leaders of Apec's 21 member economies meet in Singapore.

The Prime Minister dwelt at length on the growing role of Singapore women and how education has changed their goals and aspirations, in a bid to highlight a situation that will confront many Asia-Pacific countries as their societies develop.

'In terms of gender roles, Singapore is probably one of the most Westernised societies in Asia,' he said.

In the West, it is taken for granted that women have a right to assume equally important positions as men in business, government and to some extent in the armed forces.

But few Asian societies operate that way, even the developed ones, he said.

In Singapore, education - not affirmative action or a quota system - has been the key catalyst in improving the lot of women, he said. It has spurred women to make inroads in politics and the workplace, he noted, adding that 55 per cent of the university intake here is now female.

But Mr Lee also noted the 'unintended consequences' of the Singapore approach.

Women are no longer content with being confined to traditional, subservient roles. While more men are prepared to treat their wives as equals, there is still a mismatch between what men want and what the women expect.

This is one reason Singaporeans are marrying late or not at all, he said.

His message reflects the ongoing national concern with marriage and procreation, an issue which the country has been grappling with for more than 20 years.

Women tend to marry around the age of 27. And despite generous pro-family incentives, like longer maternity leave, the fertility rate last year was 1.28. This is well below the 2.1 rate needed for a population to replace itself naturally.

Mr Lee expressed the hope that Singapore will eventually find a 'new formula' to enable young people to fulfil their aspirations and also have families.

He stressed that Singapore has no ready answers and there are no permanent, perfect solutions.

But this is how society progresses - 'feeling our way forward step-by-step, with constant adjustments in each new generation', he said.

Yesterday's session also saw discussions on how women in Apec countries can weather the troubled economic climate.

The concern was raised by Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports, when she spoke earlier in the day.

An estimated nine million more women in Apec may become jobless this year, bringing their jobless total to around 38 million.

Women play a significant role in the Apec nations, she noted, saying their economic contributions amount to US\$80 billion (S\$115 billion) each year.

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'I was speaking to one young man recently and saying that well, you ought to pay more attention if you are cultivating a young lady, well, pamper her, make her feel special.

'I was told no, that's not how it works. Young ladies nowadays do not want their men to carry handbags for them. So I have to learn and update myself.'

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, on the new generation of young and well-educated Singaporean women wanting to pull their own weight.

