



News

More women than men 'could lose jobs'

Neo Chai Chin

TODAY

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English

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INCREASING economic opportunities for women was a major theme of the two-day 14th Apec Women Leaders Network (WLN) Meeting, and yesterday, the bulk of its recommendations made to Apec leaders mapped out ways to achieve this goal.

They include ensuring access to financing, especially for small and micro enterprises, and promoting employment generation programmes for women.

"Our region loses between US\$42 billion (\$60.3 billion) and US\$47 billion a year by restricting women's access to employment," said United Nations Under-Secretary General Noeleen Heyzer yesterday.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 22 million women could lose their jobs this year due to the economic crisis. Apec is made up of 21 economies including China, the United States and Japan.

While men's job losses initially increased faster than women's in this downturn, more recent data show that job loss rates for men are slowing, noted Ms Ines Alberdi, executive director for the UN Development Fund for Women, on Tuesday. Unemployment of women could reach 7.4 per cent this year, compared to seven per cent for men.

Women working in export industries of developing countries are especially vulnerable, as they form the bulk of the work force in sectors like electronics and garments — which face shrinking demand in a downturn, said Ms Alberdi.

The WLN meets again in Japan in September next year. NEO CHAI CHIN



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Gender bias in stimulus packages?

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Economic stimulus packages rolled out by many countries in the past year can have a gender bias.

For example, when investments are made in infrastructure and public works, it is likely men who directly benefit in terms of jobs created. And if help is targeted at small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), like textiles and handicraft, it is more likely women who stand to directly benefit.

Outlining these findings from a recent United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) working paper, Unifem executive director Ines Alberdi said: "The gender-specific ways in which the crisis is impacting on real people makes it critical to monitor how countries are responding."

Speaking at a plenary session at the 14th Apec Women Leaders Network Meeting yesterday, Ms Alberdi noted that many countries have funnelled huge amounts of money to bail out their banks.

But she added: "Are they likely to find an equal amount for the so-called 'real economy'?"

Another delegate, Ms Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Malaysia's Minister for Family, Women and Community Development, pointed out that because many policy decisions are made by politicians, "it is very important for a lot more women to be involved in the political arena".

If women do not step up to take childcare and maternity leave issues into mainstream politics, they would continue to be sidelined as "women's issues", she added.

But women in Apec have made progress over the last decade in the political arena, noted the World Bank's sector director for gender and development Mayra Buvinic.

From 1997 to last year, Singapore women made the greatest progress in Apec for political participation, she said.

From four female Members of Parliament 20 years ago, there are now 22 women out of a total of 94 MPs. Neo Chai Chin

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News

Working towards '2nd hump' ; Getting women to rejoin workforce after having children is an uphill battle

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WHEN it comes to getting older or married women to rejoin the workforce, government agencies and other stakeholders should take a leaf from the Health and Education ministries, said Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports yesterday.

Every employer should have a database of staff who have left the workforce, and keep in touch with them, she said on the sidelines of the 14th Apec Women Leaders Network Meeting at Raffles City Convention Centre.

“Nurses and teachers who are still qualified get called back. So we hope it’s not just the Education and Health ministries; we hope more ministries and stakeholders ... use letters or email to re-establish contact with former staff, and ask if they want to come back for training to rejoin the workforce,” said Mrs Yu-Foo in Mandarin.

The Education Ministry, for example, has a scheme for married teachers with children under 12, or those over 55, to take on a part-time workload.

In Singapore, the women labour force participation rate currently stands at around 60 per cent, slightly below the 2007 average of 62.5 per cent in the East Asia and Pacific region.

Females’ participation in Singapore’s labour force resembles a “single-hump camel” — where many women join the workforce out of school, then leave when they have children, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in the Meeting’s opening address. “In other countries, you have a second hump, because after the children go to school, the women come back to work again ... before they retire,” he said. In Singapore, “I can see the beginning of a second hump, but we have to work harder”.

Ms Mayra Buvinic, sector director of gender and development at the World Bank, believes the “hump” will resemble a plateau in the future, as “women get into the workforce and stay much more than they used to”.

Women now make up more than half the workforce in the Apec — a 21-member group including Australia, Peru, Canada, China and the United States — and their contribution is an estimated US\$80 billion (\$115 billion) each year.

But in Singapore, female empowerment has had “unintended consequences”, such as pressure on family and personal priorities, said Mr Lee. While the Government tries to be pro-family, it will “let society find a new balance, a new ‘gender compact’”.

He said: "Perhaps, we will eventually find a new formula in society which enables young people to fulfil their aspirations and have families and children."