

Gig economy a boost for women

Data shows the share of self-employed women has increased by 8% since 2010

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PETALING JAYA: With new technologies and social media, a burgeoning gig economy has the potential to boost female participation in the workforce.

The gig economy, which allows independent workers to be hired for short-term projects or engagements, has enabled women to continue working, even after starting their family.

However, experts said there were challenges to consider such as social protection and long-term career prospects.

World Bank senior economist Achim Schmillen said the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of working age women rose in line with the increasing use of new technologies for businesses.

"The LFPR of working age women in Malaysia has increased significantly from 46.8% in 2010 to 55.2% last year.

"This was in parallel to a rapidly growing access to new technologies, as indicated by increasing Internet and mobile network coverage," he said.

Schmillen said focus group discussions for World Bank's recent report *Breaking Barriers: Toward Better Opportunities for Women in Malaysia* showed that many self-employed women were relying on new technologies such as social media for marketing.

He said while there was no concrete statistics on the number of Malaysians engaged in the gig economy, data from the Department of Statistics indicated that at least 19% of 14.8 million workers were self-employed.

"In recent years, the share of self-employed women increased from 11.6% in 2010 to

19.5% last year.

"This suggests that the gig economy can be an effective way for women to enter the workforce. But it also creates challenges," he said.

Schmillen added that while some gig economy jobs might offer fair income, social protection and prospects for self-development, others do not.

"While the gig economy might ease women's access to the labour market, it may lead to a widening of gender gaps in access to jobs that offer better pay, benefits and prospects.

"For gig economy jobs, it will be important that they are a stepping stone for the promotion of women's economic opportunity," he said, adding that efforts to strengthen the protection of gig economy workers would be important.

He also said the initiative to extend the Social Security Organisation scheme for self-employed drivers in the past year would serve as a "useful testing ground".

In addition, Schmillen said an improved support for women by the promotion of availability, quality and affordability of child and aged care, would also be vital.

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said the variety of jobs in the gig economy was grow-



Women power: Chia and Shamsuddin agree that the gig economy is indeed helping women who have to juggle homelife and earning an income.



ing, enabling women to take advantage of technologies to be more independent and flexible.

"Digital work platforms are growing fast in service roles where women are well represented, including online retail, accommodation and food services.

"Many women have become e-commerce entrepreneurs and made inroads to supply chains.

"They usually find that the work is more fulfilling and satisfying than full time jobs," he said.

Shamsuddin said women could leverage the gig economy to juggle their work and their responsibilities as a mother and wife.

But he noted that gig economy workers had to navigate the risks of non-traditional employment such as income uncertainty and lacking in social protection.

Local startup GoGet co-founder Francesca Chia said women, who had been away from the workforce, could take up short-term gig work, using the skills they already have.

"Gig works are more focused and required only specific skills.

"The gig economy also allows those outside of the labour force due to studies, house work, family or retirement, to participate in the workforce," she said.

Chia cited an example of a woman, who

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Achim Schmillen

retired from Petronas, but is now using her spare time to train new GoGet workers.

She said 45% of GoGet's job posters and 20% of their 12,000-strong workforce were female.

GoGet, she said, recently spoke at the United Nations General Assembly about the need to protect flexible and gig workers.

Angie Chin, the founder of women co-working space HanaWomen Hub, said the gig economy would enable women with new families to allocate extra time to look after their children while earning some income.

But she said there might be certain trade-offs such as a limit to opportunities in meeting clients or colleagues.

"This may limit their growth or opportunities in terms of advancing their career unless they can prove their track records when negotiating their remunerations," she said.