

Panel discusses obstacles faced by working women

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► 'Companies should prioritise safe working environment to prevent sexual harassment from becoming commonplace'

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PETALING JAYA: While women have made immense strides in the working world in the country, gaps still remain, according to four Berjaya Corporation Bhd (BCorp) independent non-executive directors.

The four Penelope Gan, Norlela Baharudin, Datin Seri Sunita Mei-Lin and Dr Jayanti Naidu Desan were panellists at a roundtable session entitled "In Thin Air – Addressing the Challenges of Women in the Workplace", recently.

Statistics Department figures in 2020 showed that women contributed 55% or RM776.9 billion to the nation's economy. It found that women's Labour Participation Rate for the same year was 55.3%, significantly lower than that of Thailand at 66.8%, and Singapore at 69.7%.

The low take-up rate, according to the panellists, could be due to subconscious bias in hiring new talent, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Sunita pointed out that decision-makers needed to step up to put the best interest of companies by

having a "diversity of views".

"From a team perspective, if you have the best interest of a company at heart, then you would want to make the best possible decision. There is a correlation between the decision-making process and diversity of views.

"If there isn't diversity of views, then you cannot give an assurance that you're getting the best decision."

Norlela echoed Sunita's sentiments.

"There is room to talk about it. The more noise there is, the more people will be aware.

"It is the responsibility of every organisation to provide a safe space and fair working environment."

Penelope said a safe working environment should be given priority to avoid sexual harassment from becoming commonplace.

"I feel this is not a personal

matter. Sexual harassment is (related) to a company's culture. If there is awareness, and if the company gives a safe space for victims to voice out, it will encourage them to come forward, while discouraging harassers from continuing with their behaviour."

Sunita said it is the responsibility of boardrooms to know how to address such issues.

The session addressed topics related to obstacles that women face in getting recognition and credit for their work, gender discrimination, as well as impossible requirements of working women to be both 100% at work and at home for the family.

At a news conference later, Norlela said more than 900 public-listed companies that meet the 17% quota of women representation on their boards and managements, have the ability to push for a minimum 30% benchmark quota.