

Challenges remain despite support for childcare, working women policies

KUALA LUMPUR (July 15): Sitting on a tiny chair in a corner of the day-care centre, Nur Najihah Ahmad Zamri smiled and waved at her sleepy daughter, who was just waking up from a nap.

It was her first visit to the day-care centre, or creche, located in the building where she works in the collections and recovery department at MBSB Bank. Parents are usually prohibited from visiting their children after dropping them off as part of the centre's COVID-19 prevention policy.

Before this, the 30-year-old mother of two had fretted about sending her oldest daughter to the centre, which opened on April 1, 2022, worried the three-year-old may not like it there. What she saw comforted her.

"I'm happy I enrolled her here because I can see how happy she is. I can see her improvement from when she was with the babysitter to being at the day-care centre," she told Bernama, adding that she planned to send her nine-month-old baby to the same centre.

Nur Najihah said after she returned to work following the birth of her second child, she had some separation anxiety and at times felt like quitting her job so she could be with the baby instead of having a babysitter to take care of her.

She believed that sending both her children to the on-site creche would relieve her stress. Being just a few floors away from her children would ease any concerns she may have during the day. And she would get to spend more time with her children on the daily commute.

Most of all, she said she could concentrate better at work, something that MBSB Bank chief people officer Farid Basir was happy to hear.

"I think (providing childcare centres for the staff) is something that we should be doing because I strongly believe if we manage the employees, the employees will manage the business, not the other way around," he said.

Nur Najihah is one of the lucky ones. Many women in Malaysia are not able to remain in or re-join the workforce because they have to take care of their children or parents. An analysis by the Asia Foundation, in collaboration with the Merdeka Centre, of three surveys spanning 2020 and 2021 found that childcare assistance was one of the most important factors in helping women to continue with their careers.

CHILDCARE INITIATIVE

Although men and women start on an equal footing when they enter the workforce, their trajectory begins to diverge when they start having children. While men's career progression is rarely affected when they have children, women's get derailed to a larger degree.

Having childcare assistance influences the ability of a woman to stay in or rejoin the workforce and how far they can advance in their career. If there is a lack of childcare options, many women will leave. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this trend and although the economy has reopened, women are returning to work but at a much slower pace.

“One of the main findings in (the United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development) research was that the odds of working are 94 percent less likely for women without childcare arrangements, as compared to those women with childcare arrangements,” said Associate Prof Dr Shanti Thambiah of the gender studies programme at Universiti Malaya, who was also the principal consultant in the study that was released in 2014.

The numbers bear it out. For years, Malaysia has had one of the lowest female labour participation rates (FLPR) among ASEAN member states, an issue affecting the economic growth of the country (https://www.bernama.com/en/b_focus/news.php?id=2098562).

As of April 2022, the FLPR was 55.5 percent, an increase of 0.3 percent from the same period last year, while 82.3 percent of eligible working age men are working or looking to work, an increase of 1.3 percent from 2021, according to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia**.

Malaysia has long sought to increase the FLPR by encouraging the building of day-care centres at workplaces. But nothing was mandated until 2018 when the government required childcare centres at every government building.

In May this year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob continued the initiative, saying annual grants amounting to RM10 million and RM30 million in 2019 and 2020 had been made available for this purpose. He also said the private sector will soon be required to do the same.

As of 2018, there were 205 day-care centres at government buildings and 52 in the private sector. According to news reports, some 1,028 unregistered and 1,910 registered childcare centres were in operation in Malaysia between February and March this year. On top of that, there are also at-home day-care centres and community day-care centres.

Farid, who is also a vice president of the Malaysian Employers Federation, told Bernama every office building should have an on-site nursery or day-care centre, saying it would reduce stress for the parents.

“If let’s say you don’t know what happened to your children now, while working, can you be productive or can you be engaged at work? You keep thinking about your children, isn’t it? So that’s the reason why I think having childcare facilities at the workplace can really help. (Staff) can always go down and check on (their) children,” he said.

He acknowledged big companies are better placed to provide on-site childcare services to their employees as it would be costly to find a suitable spot and carry out renovations, but said the trade-off was worth it.

For now, office childcare centres in the private sector are usually attached to large companies and multinational corporations. More often than not, they also own the building. For example, the MBSB Bank day-care centre is located in the basement of the MBSB Bank Tower in Petaling Jaya.

As such, many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) think hosting a childcare centre on site is unfeasible.

“SMEs do not have any budget to do the childcare centre. It’s a good idea but all the SMEs are very small, they don’t have the place to put in the childcare centre,” said Ding Hong Sing, president of SME Association of Malaysia.

He said the government should only require childcare centres to be opened in buildings and areas that are newly developed, and pay to build and staff the centres. When asked if tax incentives would encourage his association members to subsidise childcare elsewhere, he said it would not.

He told Bernama almost 30 percent of the 125 staff at his frozen foods company are women, who mostly work in administration and marketing.

Considering SMEs make up the majority of businesses in the country, having them on board in providing childcare assistance to their employees, either in the form of an on-site day-care centre or a childcare allowance, would help increase female labour participation.

It would also be a relief to many of the women currently working for SMEs, like Qaila who gave a fake name in case of retaliation from her employer.

The 22-year-old mother-of-two is thinking of giving up her job so she could watch her children instead of depending on a babysitter, who she said has shaken her five-month-old baby for crying too much.

But quitting her job means one less paycheck for the household. Without her salary, the family of four would be forced to live on less than RM3,000 a month in the Klang Valley.

“I feel guilty and sad leaving my babies behind. As a mother, I wish I could bring them everywhere with me because babysitters nowadays don’t really take care of kids properly,” she said.

Economist Datuk Dr Madeline Berma told Bernama Qaila’s situation was not unusual, adding that small businesses would need a push to get them on board which can be done by giving them incentives like subsidies, or taxing them if they failed to comply.

“(Because) small businesses, their priority is profit so why would they want to have a big headache just to fulfil the women’s agenda when (they) have all these men?” she asked.

She said there needs to be a shift in thinking when trying to retain women in the workforce, adding it should not just focus on getting women back in the office. Luckily, she said, the pandemic has normalised working-from-home and the gig economy, calling on the government to study the limits of the gig economy and how it could benefit women.

International Labour Organisation consultant Suriani Kempe agreed that the issue requires new thinking but said helping women run an online business from home or just work from home was not much of a solution. Instead, the strategy should also encourage equality via policy or programmes, on top of affordable and accessible childcare services.

Research has found that when fathers take paternity leave – longer than Malaysia’s current one-week paid leave – mothers and children tend to be happier and healthier while fathers become closer to their children. Equality-focused policies and programmes, such as mentoring for women, have also been found to be helpful.

“My contention with those (previous) programmes is always that these programmes don’t address the fundamental inequality in gender care work. It’s like giving women extra tools (to work from everywhere, all the time),” she said.

“But what these programmes don’t do is fundamentally change or tell husbands, ‘Hey guys, why don’t you just step into the picture and take on some of that care work’.”

<https://www.theborneopost.com/2022/07/15/challenges-remain-despite-support-for-childcare-working-women-policies/>