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.

But the uncertainty, which allows independent workers to be hired for short-term projects and 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 Schmollén 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 46.9% in 2005 to 52.2% in 2018. This is in parallel to a rapidly growing and engaging gig economy," he said.

"We would look forward to group discussions for World Bank’s recent report Breaking Barriers: Toward Better Opportunities for Women in Malaysia. I think that a lot of women have been relying on new technologies such as social media for marketing," he added.

He said while there was no concrete statistic to confirm the number of Malaysian gig workers, at least 15% 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.

Schmollén 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 widening of gender gaps in access to jobs that offer better pay, benefits and prospects. For gig economy jobs, it will be important to have a stepping stone for the promotion of women’s economic opportunity," he said, adding that efforts to strengthen the population of gig economy workers would be important.

He also said the initiative to create the Social Security Organisation scheme for self-employed workers in the past year would serve as a “useful testing ground.”

In addition, Schmollén 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 growing, enabling women to take advantage of new technologies to become 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 income from 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 Francisco Chiu said women, who had been away from the workforce, could take short-term gig work, using the skills they already had.

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

She said 43% 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 NanoWomen 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.

“Many 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.

Women making headway in the gig economy

PETALING JAYA: When Cheryl Ong decided to take up short-term dispatch jobs or “gigs,” her family was sceptical.

“They told me I shouldn’t be doing this kind of job,” she said of the concerns raised by her parents.

Ong wanted a semi-flexible working arrangement to spend time with her children. So she joined GoGet platform, which is an app connecting individuals and businesses to workers, who were trained to carry out short-term tasks or errands.

“It was a little extra money to help with my family expenses,” she said.

The 15-year-old took the dispatch job, which is thought to be a ‘dead-end’, turned out to be a stepping stone to other opportunities.

“On a 50%-50 chance and depends on what you plan to do. It can expand your network, deepen your career in a field," she said.

As “a patsy chef, I was able to keep in the loop in the industry. I faced part-time freelance jobs from meeting some of the job posters, especially in the food and beverages industry.

"With the work experience from these people, I even managed to land a full time job working in a pastry kitchen," she said.

Women participation in gig economy could earn them extra income and advance their careers.

Female entrepreneurs are also able to hire workers in an accessible manner to start and grow their businesses.

Iza Balekuddin, who runs a homemade baked goods business called BakedGli, said the gig economy helped her expand her business.

Before using on-demand errand runners, the 30-year-old had to spend up to a day to deliver a few cake orders.

“We would have to wait for customers and sometimes, they may come late or the delivery address is wrong, so the whole day is wasted. But now, everything runs smoothly.”

Iza, who previously worked as a marketing executive at a fashion house, said she enjoyed the flexibility and autonomy of running her own business.

“I decided to leave my previous job because now I have control over what I do,” she said.

Iza had admitted working to fully short term jobs and requests could be challenging.

"Customers may demand for certain things, and it may be hard because our cakes are made to order. However we’ve learnt to manage accordingly,“ she said.

"The labour force participation rate of working age women has increased. This is parallel to the rapidly growing access to new technologies as indicated by increasing Internet and mobile network coverage,” said Schmollén.