

Employment rate for women stable during pandemic: Josephine Teo

But there's still a need to find time to train and upskill to remain relevant, in order to grasp future opportunities

Sue-Ann Tan

The employment rate among women was not hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic, which speaks of the resilience of female workers and the broader support for them to remain in the workforce, Manpower Minister Josephine Teo said yesterday.

She added that women also need to continue to keep their skills relevant to grasp future opportunities.

She told a virtual forum on gender diversity and inclusion in the workforce: "We had paid quite a lot of attention to how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted women in the workforce last year. I was particularly concerned because the hardest hit sectors, for example, accommodation, have got a higher representation of women within their workforce.

"When we scan the international environment, it was also very apparent that women were disproportionately affected by the pan-

dem, and... the resulting closures to schools, as well as lockdowns in many countries."

But she noted that Singapore's female employment rate had remained relatively stable at around 73 per cent last year, while the incidence of retrenchment was about the same for men and women.

She said that women need to find time and opportunity to train and upskill to remain relevant in the workforce, especially as the retirement and re-employment ages are raised and women have a longer lifespan.

"There are still... the challenges of workforce transformation... and of keeping up with the digitalisation of businesses. I think we mustn't underestimate the impact on the entire workforce and women in particular," Mrs Teo said.

"I think it is more difficult for women because apart from work commitments, quite often they juggle many hats. We are caregivers, as well, to parents or to children... So the challenge for women to



Manpower Minister Josephine Teo also told a virtual forum on gender diversity and inclusion in the workforce that another thing that had to change was getting more women on company boards. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

73%

Singapore's female employment rate last year.

keep their skills relevant is something that we should not disregard, we have to work quite hard at it."

Another thing that has to change is getting more women on company boards, Mrs Teo said during the panel dialogue organised by the National University of Singapore Office of Alumni Relations.

"Our board representation leaves much more to be desired," she said, adding that women who reach senior management positions form about 30 per cent now.

"But our board representation is about 16 per cent. It's been improving but the pace can be a lot better."

Fellow panellist Georgette Tan, president of United Women Singapore, said 30 per cent of women on boards should be the base and the target has shifted to 50 per cent, according to a global organisation that pushes for gender-balanced boards.

She added that there is a supply of women who are ready, but that companies have to make the active effort to bring them onto boards when a position opens up.

Ms Lyn Lee, chief diversity and inclusion officer of Royal Dutch Shell, said: "There's a huge business performance and financial impact around this", noting that firms that have more senior women in organisations are more

likely to be above average in business performance.

Dr Vandana Ramachandran, co-founder of Singapore Women in Science, said Singapore also needs more visible female role models.

Meanwhile, responding to a question on whether there might be anti-discrimination legislation, Mrs Teo said the ministry is prepared to do it if society needs a stronger signal that certain things are sacrosanct.

But she noted that such legislation is not a "silver bullet" that necessarily translates into better outcomes.

"Certainly we should never close our minds to the possibility of legislating anything. If (circumstances) change to the point that we need to do something about it, we will."

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