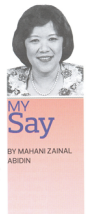


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Creative solutions for our childcare woes



When I started my career as a lecturer, my son was very young. I was, however, very fortunate to not only have a supportive husband but also good domestic help to assist with looking after my son while I was at work. This is not a luxury that many have.

Often, my younger women friends and colleagues would lament over the difficulties of good and affordable childcare to allow them to stay in the workforce. Some had to make the hard decision, often at great financial sacrifice, to take on the traditional role of "stay-at-home mums".

Although there are those who are homemakers by choice, there are others who are forced to give up their jobs because of the lack of adequate childcare. The question is, "How do we keep women in the labour force while raising a family?"

This is a challenge that needs to be addressed urgently.

Not long ago, when there was a moratorium on Indonesians being sent to work as maids in Malaysia, many households found themselves in a predicament: "who would look after the kids while mum and dad go to work?"

In particular, our dependence on domestic help from Indonesia was nightmarish. More than seven out of every 10 foreign maids employed as at end-2011 were from Indonesia. Another worry is that in five years, Indonesia will stop sending its citizens to work as maids.

One solution is to look for maids from other countries but such efforts have not been very successful. It does not help that the cost of hiring maids has since skyrocketed beyond the affordability of the average Malaysian household.

As a stopgap measure, grandparents were encouraged to babysit, but this is not a permanent or viable solution.

A much more immediate and convenient solution is to engage informal childminders. However, there has been an increase in child abuse cases due to the fact that these childminders have not received any formal training.

Clearly something needs to be done. The issue of availability of quality and affordable child care has now reached a tipping point. Why?



In order to fulfil the country's vision of becoming a high-income nation, it is imperative that the number of double-income households is maintained. In addition, with the rising cost of living, it is next to impossible to live on a single income and raise a family.

The reality is that not only is it important for women to remain in the labour force once they start a family, it is necessary in order to provide adequately for their family

According to the 2012 World Development Report, women's participation in the labour force in Malaysia is 48% - one of the lowest rates in East Asia. For this reason, I welcome the government's commitment to increase women's participation on the labour force to be on a par with the global average of 55% by 2015.

Let's look at the figures. Malaysia has a high level of participation of women in the workforce between the ages of 25 and 29. However, once they start to have a family, they stop work. And this lower participation rate does not recover.

The participation rate of fresh female graduates in Malaysia is 57%, but by mid-to-senior management level, it drops to 11% (McKinsey proprietary database, 2011). At the CEO level, the participation rate is only 5%, and for board members, 6%.

In contrast, in Hong Kong, at the fresh graduate level, the participation rate is 54%, dropping to a reasonable 23% at mid-to-senior management level. The participation of Hong Kong women at CEO level is 2%, and for board members, 9%.

The task is to retain women in the labour force and not just design policies that support those who leave after marriage.

Educated and trained women leaving the labour force is, in fact, a form of brain drain. We have trained so many women, adding an important component to the Malaysian talent pool.

In public universities, the ratio of female to male students is two to one. So, the question that needs to be answered is whether we are optimising this asset.

The government is working on multiple policy areas, including flexible working hours, affordable quality childcare arrangements and entrepreneurship in order to retain women in the labour force. Establishment of childcare centres in the workplace is encouraged and there are now 71 such centres in government agencies and 20 in private organisations.

This is not sufficient. What is needed is a comprehensive policy to provide quality and affordable childcare to allow mothers to stay in the labour force and progress in their career. Women should not be forced to choose between having a career and being a mother. It is not a one or the other option.

As parents, we naturally want our children to be brought up with the right values, receive good education and grow up in a safe environment. Thus, quality childcare has another equally key objective in that it is an important factor in contributing to the children's educational and developmental outcome. In this regard, institutional childcare can be coupled with early childhood education.

The solution is not rocket science because other countries have systems that we can learn from and adapt to suit our needs. For example, childcare systems in Sweden, France, Germany and the UK can provide a useful comparison because in these countries, the participation rate of women in the workforce is high.

In most of these countries, the public sector plays a leading role in the provision of childcare, mostly provided by the local municipalities and subsidised so that the cost is affordable. It is a full-time service and the quality is regulated by the government. Of course, if it is too highly subsidised, there is the problem of financial sustainability, like in Scandinavian countries.

Australia offers an interesting model. It has an extensive childcare system and benefits. In this case, the registered child carers are individuals approved and regulated by the government. These approved child carers must meet certain high-quality standards and operating requirements.

Families who use registered childcare qualify for financial support or benefits from the government. The amount of childcare benefits depend on the level of income, type and amount of care used, the reasons and the number of children that the family has in such care.

Quality and affordable childcare is important to Malaysian families if we want to achieve our goals of being a developed country with a high standard of living and quality of life. We can have our cake and eat it too - fully utilising our women human capital, providing room for women to fully progress in their career and bringing up our children well.

We can even start a new profession - qualified childminders or carers who are well trained and well compensated. Nursing graduates who can't find employment can be trained to be professional childminders. We must be bold and resolve to develop a comprehensive child care system for the long-term benefit of our society.

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