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# Community-based childcare the answer

By Chai Mei Ling

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Community-based childcare centres assisted by the private sector is the answer to the woes besetting Malaysian parents caught in the Indonesian maid conundrum.

Despite years of reluctance by companies to set up crèches at workplaces, they are receptive to grouping together and sharing responsibility in supporting childcare centres run by the community.

This arrangement would enable a few companies in a locality to come together and contribute to the cost of running the centre looking after their employees' children.

This, said Human Resources Deputy Minister Datuk Maznah Mazlan, would allow more women to enter the workforce and reduce the country's dependence on foreign labour.

"Having a childcare centre is a day-to-day responsibility, which means employers need to have a special unit to supervise it.

"There are many conditions to be met, like building standards, security, the children's curriculum and nutrition, and the childminder's skills.

"There are also the rent, wages for the workers, maintenance and operational costs to consider.

"Because of the heavy responsibility, the Malaysian Employers' Federation has not been supportive of having individual childcare centres in each organisation."

The good news is that employers are keen on community-based centres that can be shared by a few companies.

The focus is to have these facilities located near a few employers, Maznah added.

Under a pilot project, the ministry's Labour Department has identified the companies and the number of working women with children located in the industrial area of Gebeng in Kuantan, Pahang.

A committee made up of employers and employees in the area, various ministries, and non-governmental organisations, would build a childcare centre from scratch or opt for an existing one in the vicinity.

The centre should be situated near enough to the companies for mothers to breast-feed their babies, check on their children or to just have a lunch break with their kids.

"If successful, this model will be rolled out nationwide. We want to show that this is indeed

workable.

"Our priority, however, is still to have one centre at each organisation," Maznah said.

On top of the pilot project, women entrepreneurial organisations have been roped in to identify corporations within the location of proposed or existing childcare centres.

Acting as a link, the Labour Department would contact these companies to explain the concept of shared respon-

sibility and facilitate partnership if their workers want to send children to the centre.

Following the recent freeze on the employment of new Indonesian maids and the proposal for RM800 as a minimum wage, many working parents have been forced to turn to other options.

Such facilities have improved significantly in recent years, but many experts said that until and unless corporate giants came into the picture, Malaysian parents would con-

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tinue to face difficulties juggling the caring for their young and working.

Figures for 2007 reflect dismal participation from private organisations, with only 26 setting up crèches in their premises, despite years of calls by the government and non-governmental organisations for the private sector to be more socially responsible.

"We have done well on the front-of-home and community-based centres, but we're still facing problems from the private sector," says Tan Sri Faizah Mohd Tahir, secretary-general of the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry.

"But we have to continue encouraging this so that mothers who return from maternity leave can bring their babies to the nursery in the office and breast feed them there. The maternal bond with the infant will then be intact."

Childcare expert Norsheila Abdullah said having daycare centres in offices would not disrupt daily operations or employees' performance.

"Contrary to such arguments, staff actually perform

better, knowing that their children are in safe hands. There will be less absenteeism and higher productivity.

"Breast-feeding a child won't take more than seven minutes. Put in a punch card system if you want to monitor your staff.

"Every company has corporate social responsibility — what's wrong with contributing to your own staff?"

"If companies divert the same attention they put into clubs, societies and unions to childcare, it's a contribution to their human capital," said Norsheila, who is also president of the Association of Registered Childcare Providers Malaysia.

Childhood development expert Datin Radziah Daud is all for setting up daycare in workplaces, provided that the provider is professional and registered.

"The first six years of a child are a very critical phase. Centres must be developmental-appropriate in activities and not just provide custodial care.

"Studies have shown that children who go to these centres get a good headstart. There's no dropout in the long

run."

The Securities Commission, Bank Negara, Sime Darby and Malaysian Institute of Micro-electronic Systems (Mimos) are among the handful of companies which have set up daycare centres.

To encourage more companies to take this up as part of their corporate social responsibility, the government has offered a double tax relief and a 10 per cent reduction per annum for 10 years.

The Human Resources Ministry is also pushing for the tax relief to include childcare allowances given by companies to employees and to activate one-stop centres to make applications for permits easier.

The current process, which requires getting approvals from the Fire and Rescue Department, Ministry of Health as well as the Local Government and Welfare Department before establishing a childcare centre has proven to be too bureaucratic.

However, the situation has somewhat been eased by the decentralisation of permit approval from the national to state level following the amendment to the Childcare Centre Act 1984 two years ago.

The licence for operating a childcare centre has also been extended to five years instead of just one.

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Datuk Maznah Mazlan says daycare will allow more women to work

**facts&figures**

Malaysian women workforce

**44-47%**

women's participation in workforce

**1.2-1.6m**

women who can potentially join the workforce

**16**

ministries have set up daycare centres