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From housework to workforce

More housewives are entering the workforce in downturn, but they face special concerns

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When her youngest daughter celebrated her 10th birthday last year, housewife Wendy Cho, 44, felt it was time to return to the workforce.

Since the birth of her first child 20 years ago, the mother of five has not held a full-time job.

In January last year, Madam Cho responded to a recruitment advertisement by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC).

In August, the O-level holder was offered a full-time position as an assistant teacher at a student care centre in Punggol.

In these belt-tightening times, her monthly pay of \$1,100 comes in handy. Her husband used to take home \$4,000 a month, but this has more than halved since his overtime work dried up.

She said: "I had thought about quitting because I have to shout a lot at work, but now that my husband is not doing so well, my salary is a good supplement."

She may be representative of more housewives joining or rejoining the workforce now that the economy is in a slump and many breadwinners are losing their jobs.

The NTUC Women's Development Secretariat (WDS) sees an average of 100 women a month seeking help to get jobs through its outreach programmes and hotlines.

Human resource (HR) experts say women re-entering the job market face special concerns.

A number may have been away from the workforce for some time. They may be asking themselves: Am I too old? Will anyone want to hire me?

Other concerns include needing to update their skills, presenting their absence from the workforce in a positive light, and easing back into the networking circuit.

Mr Josh Goh, senior manager of corporate services at The GMP Group, a recruitment firm, said: "Women may find themselves out of touch, especially if they have been out of the workforce for a long time and have not been upgrading their skills."

There are also many housewives who do not know where and how to look for a job, said Mr David Ang, executive director of the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI).

The job market slump is itself an obstacle.

HR experts say companies have more stringent hiring requirements now amid more intense competition for jobs.

While all job seekers are affected, housewives may feel even more disadvantaged amid contenders like the retrenched, new graduates and mid-career job switchers.

Ms Eunice Chia-Lim, manager of market research at PeopleSearch, said: "Employers have a wider selection of candidates. While the hiring decision may have been an objective one, applicants who are mothers may feel that they have a disadvantage."

There is also the prevailing perception that mothers tend to be more inflexible with working hours or may be more likely to take time off to deal with family issues.

GMP's Mr Goh said there are recruitment managers who still equate rigid adherence to office hours with productivity. "They feel that mothers spend more time away from the office to attend to family matters. Hence, they are more reluctant to hire mothers," he said.

To help women find jobs, WDS started a Back-To-Work Women Programme in 2007. It has since successfully placed 2,700 women in jobs.

It also has a slew of programmes and funds to encourage companies to hire women.

More than 70 companies are tapping its Flexi-Work Fund to recruit women workers on a part-time or flexi-work basis.

These companies are well represented, hailing from sectors such as security, childcare, administration, food and beverage (F&B), and cleaning services.

F&B company Mr Bean counts itself as having benefited from the Flexi-Work Fund.

Since June last year, it has hired 55 housewives under the scheme. They are hired mostly as service crew at its food kiosks.

Mr Kang Puay Seng, Mr Bean's managing director, said: "We see a lot of potential in housewives. They have been a neglected group, but as long as they are given proper training, they make very good workers."

HR experts say there may be situations where a reputable recruitment consultancy could help housewives keen to return to work evaluate their strengths and map out their career options.

To help them regain their confidence about getting back to working life, SHRI's Mr Ang suggested that they take up courses through the Government's Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (Spur) to expand, build up and update their work knowledge.

However, HR experts said back-to-work housewives must be prepared to lower their job expectations, especially in this weak job market.

Companies may offer salaries that are less than half of what they used to earn, said Mr Ang.

Ms Peony Lim, manager of Robert Walters' sales and marketing recruitment division, said housewives should also consider contract work as there are more of such opportunities than full-time work.

Most contract assignments tend to last between six and 12 months. They often come with a monthly salary and some basic medical and annual leave benefits, she said.

To allay concerns about their work commitment, housewives could highlight to hiring managers the level of support they have at home, such as people who can take care of their young children, Ms Lim said.

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Job seekers or employers interested in finding out more about WDS' programmes can e-mail wds@ntuc.org.sg or call 6213-8270 or 6213-8591.