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Govt mulls flexi option for working mothers

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KUALA LUMPUR: Women should have the choice of opting out of the workforce to raise their families and rejoining when their children are older, Datuk Seri Najib Razak said.

"There should be a greater level of flexibility in the workplace to encourage women to return after their children have become more independent. This would allow women to safeguard their family interests and not be cut off from the workforce at the same time," the deputy prime minister said.

"The Public Service Department should conduct a study to see whether this can be done, then it will be discussed in the cabinet."

The suggestion, delivered during his keynote address at the Women's Summit 2007 here yesterday, received thunderous applause from the audience.

"The private sector, in particular, should take note of the suggestion as it is becoming a global trend. Women in the private sector are not getting a fair deal and companies that do not take heed of their female employees' needs will lose out in terms of their workforce, and eventually their profits.

"In terms of economic productivity, women have contributed almost RM55 billion to the country's gross domestic product. Work-life balance must be a business issue. Companies with family-friendly policies will benefit in the long run in terms of productivity and profit."

Najib said the government acknowledged and valued the role of women in development. Economic growth increases when women are given more opportunities in



Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor and Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil with women and children after opening The Women's Summit.

education and employment.

"Men and women must be equal partners in the economic development of the nation. Restricting women's access to education and health is detrimental to human capital development and labour force participation."

Najib quoted a 2007 survey by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, which indicated the high economic and social costs of gender discrimination.

"The Asia-Pacific region, for instance, is losing US\$42 billion (RM145 billion) to US\$47 billion a year because of restrictions on women's access to employment opportunities. The gender gap in

education, on the other hand, is costing between US\$16 billion to US\$30 billion per year," said Najib.

He said Malaysian women had benefited from greater access to education and training.

"In 1959, there were only 77 female undergraduates in the University of Malaya. Today, female students outnumber males by a ratio of 61:39. Women's participation in the labour force has also increased from 30.8 per cent to around 46 per cent between 2000 and 2006.

"Women should always be aware of the rapidly changing economy. They need to upgrade their skills and have the right atti-

tude and work ethic. In the process of globalisation, if they have the appropriate skills as demanded by the economy, they will never be out of work."

Najib's suggestion received positive reactions from women's groups.

Norhayati Kaprawi from Sisters In Islam said the option should be open to both parents.

Ivy Josiah, executive director of the Women's Aid Organisation, said such options for working parents had long been practised in Europe and Australia.

The fifth annual Women's Summit theme this year is "Putting Women at the Heart of Development".