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MEDIA RELEASE

Women Ready to Return to Work Still Face Barriers to Suitable, Sustainable Employment; SCWO Sets Out Pathways to Translate Research Findings Into Community-led Solutions

Singapore, 18 September 2026 – Women seeking to return to Singapore's workforce described being motivated and actively preparing themselves for employment, yet many continued to encounter barriers in translating that readiness into interviews and job opportunities, according to new research released today by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), at the third edition of its *Summit for Action on Gender Equality (SAGE)*. The study was conducted by SCWO in collaboration with the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Women and Family (WAF) unit, drawing on the partners' shared interest in strengthening women's workforce participation and supporting women navigating caregiving, employment and workforce re-entry.

The research, *Women's Workforce Re-entry: Challenges, Barriers & Opportunities*, examines women's experiences across the return-to-work journey — from leaving employment and taking a career break, through considering a return, preparing and searching for work, to re-entering and remaining in employment.

SCWO will use the findings as the starting point for its next phase of work, bringing research evidence together with ground and sector expertise to develop practical, community-led solutions and inform policy and workplace recommendations.

The research also builds on NTUC Women and Family's longstanding work in supporting women's workforce participation and addressing caregiving-related barriers to employment, including advocacy on workplace flexibility and efforts to strengthen support for women across different stages of work and caregiving.

"What this research shows is that returning to work is not a single moment when a woman starts looking for a job again. The journey can begin before she leaves the workforce and continues after she returns. We need to look beyond simply getting women back into jobs — to whether suitable opportunities exist, whether workplaces are ready to support their

return, and whether women can stay and progress once they return,” said Dr Seow Yian San, President of SCWO.

Ms Yeo Wan Ling, Assistant Secretary-General of NTUC and Director of NTUC Women and Family, said “Many women who intend to return to work tell us they want to contribute and continue building their careers. But returning is not always as simple as applying for a job. For some, it means finding work that can fit with caregiving responsibilities. For others, it is rebuilding confidence, refreshing skills or navigating a workplace that has changed during their career break. What this research reinforces is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We also need employers to look beyond the career gap and recognise the experience, skills and potential that women bring back with them. The Labour Movement will continue working with employers and partners to create more flexible ways back into work — including flexible work arrangements, job redesign and opportunities to refresh skills — so that women who want to return can do so, and continue to grow in their careers.”

Research Identifies Friction Points from Workforce Exit to Re-entry

The findings draw on three complementary sources of evidence: 20 in-person focus group discussions with 120 women conducted in July 2026; an online poll of 502 women aged 24 and above residing in Singapore conducted in August 2026; and a review of local and international return-to-work initiatives.

The findings highlight several key friction points:

- **Retention is the first return-to-work intervention.** For women considering leaving because of caregiving pressures, practical workplace adjustments — including flexibility around when and where work is done — may help prevent an avoidable exit in the first place. The findings suggest that return-to-work support should therefore begin before women leave the workforce, not only when they are ready to return. These findings are also consistent with a 2023 joint survey by NTUC Women and Family and PAP Women’s Wing, which found that 87 per cent of women viewed flexible work arrangements as an important factor in their decision to stay in or leave a job.
- **Women want to return to work.** Among women polled who had taken or were currently on a career break, 80 per cent intended to return to work. However,

nearly seven in 10 of all women polled believed that taking a career break makes finding suitable work more difficult.

- **Different returners face different pressure points.** The research found that return-to-work needs vary according to the length of a career break, career stage and type of work. Short-break returners generally required less retraining, while women returning after longer breaks faced weakened networks and changes in workplace practices and technology. PMET returners placed greater emphasis on support matched to their sector, role and seniority, while non-PMET returners placed greater emphasis on practical training, predictable schedules, accessible work locations and viable pay.
- **Suitable opportunities matter, not just job connections.** Women described actively preparing to return, including refreshing their skills, updating their CVs and searching through multiple channels. However, suitable roles that match their experience and need for flexibility were not always available.
- **Placement is not success if the job cannot last.** 61 per cent of women polled identified flexible work arrangements as their most desired form of return-to-work support. Some women described accepting lower pay or seniority to secure workable arrangements, but flexibility without manageable workloads or progression prospects could still result in unsustainable employment. The findings point to the importance of looking beyond whether a woman gets a job to whether she can remain and progress in it.

Singapore already has a substantial support ecosystem. SCWO's landscape review identified 33 non-government initiatives delivered by 26 organisations, alongside existing public support. The opportunity is therefore not simply to add more programmes, but to strengthen how preparation, suitable employment opportunities, employer practices and post-hire support work together across the return-to-work journey.

From Research to Action: Building Stronger Pathways Back to Work

SCWO will take the findings forward through *SCWO CoLab*, bringing together SCWO Member Organisations to identify priority friction points and opportunities for action.

Areas for further exploration emerging from the research include retention before women leave the workforce; the availability of suitable and flexible work; employer practices around recruitment and re-entry; differentiated support for different groups of returners; and the workplace conditions needed to sustain employment after women return.

Through SCWO CoLab, SCWO Member Organisations will translate research findings into community-led solutions responding to the needs and gaps identified. Its inaugural *2026/27 Challenge — Creating Better Pathways for Women Returning to Work* will provide a facilitated environment for collaborative ideation and expert input to help Member Organisations develop and strengthen practical solutions.

As part of SCWO CoLab, successful applicants can take part in the Singapore Government Partnerships Office's Citizens' Circle to further develop their ideas and collaborate with other partners. Promising community-led ideas may subsequently explore support through the SG Partnerships Fund, subject to prevailing eligibility and assessment criteria. This creates opportunities for these ideas to move from research and ideation towards implementation through citizen-government partnerships.

SCWO's longer-term aim for its work on workforce re-entry is to contribute to stronger pathways for women who choose to return to work — supporting not only their re-entry into employment, but their ability to access suitable work in which they can contribute, remain and progress.

Building a Three-Year Research-to-Action Programme

The 2026 return-to-work initiative marks the first year of a three-year SCWO research-to-action programme that will apply this approach to key issues affecting women. Following *Women & Work Transitions* in 2026, SCWO will focus on *Domestic Violence* in 2027, followed by *Caregiver Wellbeing* in 2028.

“The research is the starting point, not the end point. Our next step is to bring the evidence together with the experience of organisations working on the ground — to identify where the friction points are, develop practical solutions and translate these insights into recommendations and action. This is the approach SCWO intends to build on over the next three years: moving from research, to solutions, to action on issues that affect women,” said Dr Seow.

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About the Research

Women's Workforce Re-entry: Challenges, Barriers & Opportunities was commissioned by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), in collaboration with the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Women and Family (WAF) unit, to understand women's experiences across the workforce exit and re-entry journey, the barriers they face, and the support landscape available to them.

The research comprised three complementary components: 20 in-person focus group discussions involving 120 women conducted between 7 and 27 July 2026; an online poll of 502 women aged 24 and above residing in Singapore conducted between 29 to 30 August 2026; and a landscape review of local and international return-to-work initiatives. The poll was conducted to provide directional quantitative context alongside the qualitative findings.

The focus group discussions included younger women returning after maternity leave, mid-career women returning after caregiving-related career breaks, mature women aged 50 to 65 with extended career breaks, and women who had attempted but been unsuccessful in returning to employment. Both PMET and non-PMET women were represented.

The landscape review examined 33 non-government return-to-work initiatives delivered by 26 organisations in Singapore, alongside existing public support, and compared these with 35 international programmes. It examined support across the return-to-work journey, including career guidance and coaching, skills training, structured placements and returnships, professional and peer networking, employer engagement, and post-hire support.

The focus group findings provide qualitative insights into women's workforce re-entry experiences, while the online poll provides additional insights into the experiences and perspectives of women seeking to return to the workforce. Neither should be interpreted as statistically representative of Singapore's wider female population. As the research was not designed to be nationally representative, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all women in Singapore.

About the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) is the national coordinating body representing women's organisations in Singapore. Through advocacy, collaboration and provision of critical services for women in need, SCWO works to amplify diverse voices and advance opportunities for women and the community. Key initiatives include the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame, Star Shelter and Maintenance Support Central. Visit us at <https://www.scwo.org.sg/>.

Media Contacts

Jocelyn Ng-Foo

Managing Partner, LivingWord Communications

M: +65 9431 6141

Email: scwo_lwc@livingwordcommunications.asia

Michelle Elias

Director, Communications & Partnerships

Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO)

M: +65 9730 8742

Email: michelle@scwo.org.sg