

Fewer older women in the workforce

Growing gender gap among seniors as more men remain working

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PETALING JAYA: The number of women working well into their golden years in the country is shrinking as more men stay in the workforce, highlighting a gender gap among older workers.

Figures from the Statistics Department (DOSM) show that the number of employed women aged 55 to 64 fell 17% to 339,600 in the second quarter of the year, compared with 407,800 over the same period five years ago.

The number of employed men in the same age group rose 23%, from 878,000 to 1.08 million.

An earlier analysis of annual data showed that women aged between 60 and 64 working past retirement increased from 15.9% in 2022 to 20.9% in 2023, suggesting a short-term uptick in older women remaining employed.

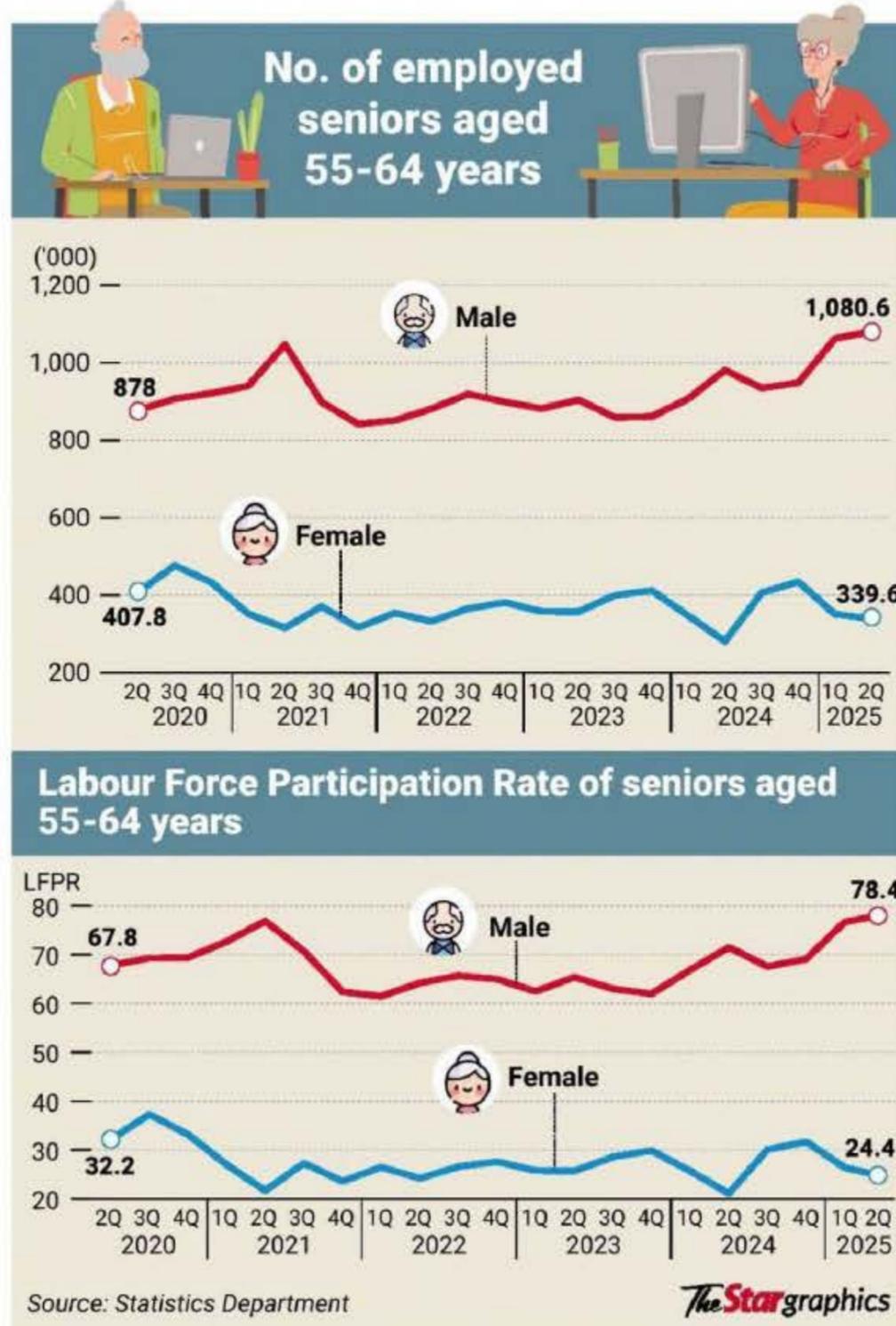
This indicates that while some women may work slightly longer past 60, fewer are maintaining employment through their mid-50s until retirement age.

Experts say the gender gap exists because women are doing the bulk of unpaid caregiving duties for family members, forcing them to leave the workforce earlier than men.

They say that men also benefit from higher rates of self-employment, which allows them to work beyond the mandatory retirement age of 60.

In total, 1.42 million people aged between 55 and 64 are currently employed, with men accounting for 76% of this group.

“Women shoulder far more unpaid family care and domestic work, and are often in lower-paying roles with less flexibility, making it unlikely for them to remain longer in the formal labour force,” said Chai Sen Tyng, senior research officer at the Malaysian



Research Institute on Ageing at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

He said there is a pressing need to have more accessible and affordable childcare and long-term care services to narrow the gender gap.

Equal opportunities and equal pay are also important for women to remain in the labour market

longer, he said.

“We must ensure that women, after a lifetime of cumulative disadvantages at the workplace, are not penalised further as they age,” he said.

Assoc Prof Dr Tey Nai Peng, a demographer at Universiti Malaya, said higher labour force participation among older men is

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Chai Sen Tyng

shaped by work histories, retirement rules and cultural expectations.

“Men generally have longer and more continuous employment histories, and they are also more likely to be self-employed, a sector not bound by mandatory retirement at 60,” he said.

DOSM data shows 57% of older male workers are self-employed compared with 37% of women.

By contrast, women are more often concentrated in formal employment, where compulsory retirement applies, and have lower educational attainment than men in older cohorts, limiting their employability.

A March 2023 research paper co-authored by Tey titled “Active Engagement and Health Status of Older Malaysians: Evidence from a Household Survey” found that the gender gap widened sharply with age.

Among men, employment fell from 44.3% at ages 60-64 to 17% at 75 and above, while for women the decline was steeper, from 19.3% to just 4.9%.

Cultural roles reinforced this

divide, Tey said.

“Women are expected to take on caregiving responsibilities, whether for grandchildren or elderly family members.

“These unpaid duties restrict their ability to continue in paid employment,” he said.

Women also face financial disadvantages due to interrupted careers and lower lifetime earnings.

“Many have limited access to pensions or social protection, leaving them more dependent on family support,” he said.

Tey said generational shifts could change the pattern.

He said female participation in the labour force has risen from 44.5% in 1982 to 56.5% in 2024, driven by greater access to education.

Today, 43.6% of employed women hold tertiary qualifications, compared with 30.5% of men.

“Younger women are entering the workforce with stronger credentials and more continuous work experience, which will improve their prospects of staying employed beyond age 55,” he said.

Government programmes such as subsidised childcare, reskilling initiatives and gender equality reforms are also helping women balance work and family responsibilities, while cultural attitudes toward women’s roles are gradually shifting.

Tey said policy support remained crucial, calling for flexible work arrangements, lifelong retraining, stronger pensions for vulnerable women, anti-discrimination measures and expanded aged-care and childcare services.

“These interventions are key to ensuring that older women are not further disadvantaged, and that those who wish to remain active in the workforce are able to do so.”