



SCWO SAGE 2026: New Return-to-Work Research and Workplace Harassment Support Service Launched

Description

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) used **SCWO SAGE 2026**, its third Summit for Action on Gender Equality, to put women's working lives squarely in the spotlight – releasing new research on the barriers women face when returning to work, and launching a dedicated support service for anyone experiencing workplace discrimination or harassment. Themed –Redefining Work: Creating New Pathways for Women–, the summit on 18 September 2026 was graced by Guest-of-Honour Ms Jasmin Lau, Acting Minister for Manpower and Senior Minister of State for Digital Development and Information, who delivered the opening address.



Speakers and partners at SCWO's Summit for Action on Gender Equality (SAGE) 2026.
Photo: SCWO

Women are ready to return â?? but suitable jobs are not always there

The headline study, *Womenâ??s Workforce Re-entry: Challenges, Barriers & Opportunities*, was conducted by SCWO in collaboration with the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Women and Family (WAF) unit. It draws on three sources of evidence: 20 focus group discussions with 120 women in July 2026, an online poll of 502 women aged 24 and above living in Singapore in August 2026, and a review of local and international return-to-work initiatives.

The numbers are telling. Among women who had taken or were on a career break, 80 per cent intended to return to work â?? yet nearly seven in 10 of all women polled believed that taking a career break makes finding suitable work more difficult. Women described actively refreshing their skills, updating their CVs and searching across multiple channels, only to find that roles matching their experience and need for flexibility were not always available.

Retention is the first return-to-work intervention

One of the studyâ??s sharper insights is that support should begin before a woman leaves the workforce, not only when she is ready to return. A 2023 joint survey by NTUC Women and Family and the PAP Womenâ??s Wing found that 87 per cent of women viewed flexible work arrangements as an important factor in deciding whether to stay in or leave a job. In the new study, 61 per cent identified flexible work arrangements as their most desired form of return-to-work support â?? but the report cautions that flexibility without manageable workloads or progression prospects can still lead to unsustainable employment.



SCWO leaders and partners at SAGE 2026, themed "Redefining Work: Creating New Pathways for Women". Photo: SCWO

"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," said Dr Seow Yian San, President of SCWO. "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.â?•

Ms Yeo Wan Ling, Assistant Secretary-General of NTUC and Director of NTUC Women and Family, added that employers need to â?•look beyond the career gap and recognise the experience, skills and potential that women bring back with themâ?•, pointing to flexible work arrangements, job redesign and opportunities to refresh skills as practical ways back into work.

From research to action: SCWO CoLab

Rather than adding yet more programmes to an already substantial ecosystem â?? SCWOâ??s landscape review counted 33 non-government initiatives run by 26 organisations â?? the council wants to strengthen how preparation, suitable opportunities, employer practices and post-hire support work together. It will do so through SCWO CoLab, whose inaugural 2026/27 Challenge, â??Creating Better Pathways for Women Returning to Workâ?•, will help member organisations develop practical, community-led solutions. Promising ideas may tap the Singapore Government Partnerships Officeâ??s Citizensâ?? Circle and, potentially, the SG Partnerships Fund.

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The “We Are a Village” artwork, co-created by SCWO’s beneficiaries, presented at SAGE 2026. Photo: SCWO

New support for workplace discrimination and harassment

SCWO's second announcement was the launch of a new Workplace Counselling and Support Service, supported by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), offering emotional, psychological and practical help to individuals facing workplace discrimination or harassment. It responds to a stubborn gap: MOM's Fair Employment Practices Report 2023 found that only 29.3 per cent of employees who experienced workplace discrimination sought help, with many held back by fear of being marginalised or worries about their careers.

Reachable by helpline, textline, email and walk-in, the service follows a five-stage framework – reach out, assessment, support and counselling, navigate and connect, and collaborative referrals – and is designed to complement, not replace, existing workplace reporting channels. It will begin operations in the first quarter of 2027 and will be open to both women and men, accepting self-referrals as well as referrals from partner agencies. The service builds on SCWO's two decades of frontline experience running Star Shelter and Maintenance Support Central, and lands as Singapore continues to strengthen protections under the Workplace Fairness Act.

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Participants at SAGE 2026, where SCWO unveiled new research and support services for women at work. Photo: SCWO

A three-year research-to-action programme

The 2026 return-to-work initiative is the first year of a three-year SCWO programme applying the same research-to-action approach to key issues affecting women: domestic violence in 2027, followed by caregiver wellbeing in 2028. “The research is the starting point, not the end point,” said Dr Seow.

For Singapore readers weighing their own next steps at work, it is a timely conversation. If you are following developments in women’s health and workplace wellbeing, see our coverage of the [National Breast Cancer Awareness Month launch at VivoCity](#); for reskilling support, the [SWDA’s free AI courses](#); and on employer practices, [Ngee Ann Polytechnic’s job redesign push](#).

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