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Najwa Alia is just one of many women who have taken to selling tech products or adapting their online strategy to attract new customers in an increasingly crowded market.

For Kuala Lumpur-based home-maker Nordiana Abdul Wahid, her day starts at 6am with preparing breakfast for the family, getting two children ready for their online classes and completing the chores for the day.

Her workday begins at 2pm when Nordiana will kick off her first live video to promote food items from cakes to potato chips on Facebook.

"I post three videos a day from Monday to Friday. It's all about creating content to inform friends and followers about the products I sell so they can reach out to me if they are interested," she said.

Nordiana felt the need to learn to do live streams to stand out, as many other sellers too had started moving their businesses online since the first movement control order (MCO) last year.

"I practised in front of the mirror and asked family members for feedback. I was scared because I didn't think I could do it," she said.

Apart from live streams, Nordiana also trained others to start online businesses. Last year, she held virtual training classes for nearly 500 participants, mostly women.

"There were a few men from various backgrounds such as aviation and engineering. I taught them the importance of product knowledge, building an online presence using social media platforms and posting content regularly," she said.

Nordiana said her business had netted her a good income although it's by no means a walk in the park.

"If it's easy then anybody can do it. But the reality is you need support, have to put in a lot of effort and plan ahead if you want to maintain a successful online business," she added.

According to The Coalition of the Malaysian Malay Hawkers and Small Traders Association (Gombak, Selangor branch), the majority of members in the non-governmental organisation (NGO) in its area are women.

"The measures implemented during the first MCO hit them hard because people couldn't travel beyond a certain distance to purchase items.

"Most of our members, including single mothers, saw their income drop to zero as a result," said Fatimah Hamid, its chairperson.

To help them adapt, Fatimah urged members to start marketing their products on social media and use delivery services to send items directly to customers.

And soon after that the NGO launched an online delivery platform, Warong Rider, to help its members.

"We trained members how to use the platform by holding tutorials on Zoom. I told them if they have a smartphone for WhatsApp and social media then they can also start using the device to reach out to a wider audience," she said.

Fatimah also assists members by promoting their business on the organisation's Facebook page, which she said has helped greatly in generating income during the pandemic.

Programmed to adapt

In Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Esmerelda Marie Majaham, who had just given birth when the pandemic hit, was beset by another challenge – her husband lost his job.

Charting a new course

She helped him to start a home-based barbecue meat business but even that hit a snag.

"The regulations that were enforced during the MCO made it difficult to run the business and we were struggling. At some point we had to put it on hold because the number of Covid-19 positive cases increased to a critical level in Sabah," she said.

Esmerelda Marie, a freelance accountant, was also not getting many jobs, which made her realise that she needed a new skill to become more employable.

Feeling that coding will give her an edge in the new normal, she signed up for an online introductory course to learn Python, a popular programming language.

"When I completed it, I asked myself what's next? I felt I needed to learn more so I looked around and found Rebound, a tech-focused career come-back programme for women but it was challenging.

"In the first two weeks, I wanted to quit because I felt overwhelmed. I was taking care of a baby and helping my 10-year-old daughter with homework. I remember putting the kids to sleep and then studying past midnight, only to realise it's time for another class at 9am," she said.

Esmerelda Marie credited her husband for motivating her to continue the course by taking over some "mummy roles" and her mother for helping out as well.

"They stepped in when they saw I needed help to cope. Eventually, I was able to complete the course which has taught me how to develop websites and build apps. It was a rewarding experience," she said.

Vani Mahadevan, the founder of TechSprint, designed the Rebound programme to specifically help women who have been retrenched due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are multiple courses under the programme, each taking about half-a-day to four days, that familiarises participants with a number of topics ranging from web development to data analytics.

Those who want to study further can opt for an extended coding course though it's not free but scholarships may be awarded.

Esmerelda Marie, who completed the extended 15-week coding course last month, is qualified to become a junior developer and is looking for a job though she prefers one that will let her work from home.

Vani said this is why a career in tech is good, as it offers flexibility: "In light of the pandemic, employers are open to accepting flexible working arrangements, as long as you have the relevant skills to offer."

She said programmes like Rebound will also give women the confidence and skill set needed to navigate the new reality.

"We started hearing about the Pink Recession where industries like hospitality, with mostly women employees, were affected by the



Najwa Alia shifted to selling computers to cater to the rising demand created by the pandemic. — NAJWA ALIA RUSLI

pandemic, making it more likely for female workers to lose their jobs.

"Helping women become tech-enabled will allow them to explore other job opportunities in the market," Vani said, adding that the barrier of entry in the tech industry is lower.

"You don't necessarily need a degree or other paper qualification for certain jobs like web development. As long as you have acquired the skills and knowledge through proper training, you are ready to work from your computer," she said.

Overcoming online harassment

Though the Internet allows women to reach a wider audience online, they also have to contend with harassment, both from men and women.

Nordiana said she's concerned about her team members facing online harassment or getting unwanted attention from strangers.

"There are ways to tell if someone has created a fake profile just

to mess with a person. So I'll remind my team members to look out for people with strange names or check if the profile has just been created.

"If they get weird messages, they have been told to ignore and block the account," she said.

Farhana Farid, an illustrator who offers digital art services and sells tea products on Twitter, said she too has received unwanted messages, making her work more challenging.

"When it's not harassment, I get snide remarks from prospective clients who feel the price that I've quoted is not what they expected but I'll take the time to explain the reason behind the pricing," she said.

Najwa Alia, on the other hand, was a victim of fake news due to someone posting online that she was a scammer.

"I confronted the person who made the post and asked 'Why are you doing this?' because the person hadn't even purchased an item from our store. The person just said sorry and made the Twitter account private," she lamented.



Farhana says receiving unwanted messages is one of the more challenging aspects of relying on social media for extra income. — FARHANA FARID

She found it difficult at first because it wasn't easy dealing with "haters", or being criticised simply for wanting to stand out to promote her business.

"I realised that I was spending too much time focusing on the negativity. I also started to see that I have supporters such as loyal customers who would stand up for me and say they believe in my work. I should be focusing on them instead," she said.

Farhana also reminded herself to focus on her goals and not stress over aspects she had no control over on the Internet.

"Sometimes, it's good to look at criticism as one way to improve yourself. But you can't always just focus on negativity. It's important to surround yourself with positive people and be kind to yourself," she said.

As for Esmerelda Marie, one of her challenges was overcoming self-doubt but the course helped her build her confidence.

"I'm really grateful to my instructor because she pushed me and my classmates to believe in ourselves," she said.

She was also inspired by her