

Malaysia's women of steel thrive in a man's world

PUTRAJAYA, March 8 — Today marks International Women's Day, which honours the achievements of women across the globe in leading the way in their respective industries.

This year, the day is also a call to #BreakTheBias for a gender-equal world that is free of prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination.

In Malaysia, the government's policies and agenda on women empowerment over the past few decades have shown their positive impact when more women have left their mark in a male-dominated workplace.

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**, women's participation in the labour market in the country has surpassed men's, with women contributing 6.23 million or 55.1 per cent to the total workforce as of February 28.

There are plenty of Malaysian women who have made it to the top, and today, they are sharing their secrets for success. To learn more about their journeys, their career paths, and the advice they would share with others, Bernama interviewed two women of steel who have thrived in a man's world.

Among the Malaysian women who have made the nation proud is Commander Maritime Dr Suzanna Razali Chan, who gained recognition from the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF) as a global women's icon in the field of maritime search and rescue (MSAR).

The principal assistant director of the Malaysian Maritime Search and Rescue and Disaster Relief Division is the first woman in Southeast Asia to win the prestigious #WomenInSAR Award in September last year for her measurable impact as a passionate advocate for MSAR in Malaysia.

Recognition for Malaysia's SAR operation

On her award received on September 14, Suzanna, 41, told Bernama, she did not expect to receive the highly coveted award given the stiff competition from other international SAR icons from across the globe. "Eleven candidates were shortlisted in the finals with assessments based on their two-year performance in 2020 and 2021.

"I have been a regular speaker at international forums and conferences especially in promoting the Malaysian SAR, among others, the World Maritime Rescue Congress 2019 in Canada and Yokosuka, Japan in addition to being awarded the best speaker in empowering women in SAR," she said.

According to Suzanna, who has a PhD in business management from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), she has also contributed ideas to the International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (IAMSAR) manual in the Malaysian SAR context, which was among the criteria for the award.

Sharing her maritime journey, Suzanna said her interests in the marine world were nurtured by her late mother who took her for regular swimming during her younger days.

Inspired by the uniformed maritime team, she enlisted into the Reserve Officer Training Unit (ROTU) while pursuing her Bachelor's Degree in Accounting at Universiti Utara Malaysia in 2003.

"After completing my studies, I joined APMM (The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency) or Maritime Malaysia as Leftenan Maritim in 2007 and in that category, I was among eight women out of 72 who were absorbed into the agency.

"Initially, my family members and friends thought my decision to pursue my passion for the marines, which is an unconventional career for women, was rather strange but later relented as they were confident of my capabilities, given my energetic personality," said Suzanna, who is the second of three siblings.

Women in SAR

Of her Malaysian Maritime Search and Rescue Disaster Relief Division, Suzanna said, her team is always ready to serve 24 hours a week for any eventualities at sea.

"Once a report is confirmed, our team will be dispatched to the location with suitable assets.

"SAR operations at sea are not easy, unlike those on the ground where accidents that occur remain static at the scene. At sea, various factors can influence accidents, such as weather, the flow of water from high tide to low tide, sea waves and communication challenges.

"In a collision involving a vessel or a small boat, victims may be swept away by tidal waves, making search efforts difficult," said Suzanna, who has undertaken a 15-day rescue mission in search of drowned victims.

Elaborating further, Suzanna said the division is currently supported by 25 staff, three of whom are women.

"All staff and officers with the potential, regardless of whether they are men or women, will be given equal opportunities for career advancement.

"To date, only 4.9 per cent of APMM personnel are women, but this has not stopped us from giving our best to the agency, and we welcome women's participation at every new intake," she said.

Suzanna, who is inspired by her idol IMRF Chief Executive Officer Theresa Crossley, said many women dare not take the plunge into the challenging and male-dominated career as seafarers.

"A change in perception is needed to encourage more women to come forward and unleash their self-potential. In this respect, APMM does not deny women's role in leadership positions," she added.

Helming a male-dominated industry

Meanwhile, Cisco Malaysia Managing Director Hana Raja, 36, shared that in an ever-evolving industry like information technology (IT), women have a great opportunity to shape the future of technology and the workforce.

"We can be the driver of a more inclusive workforce that celebrates all differences, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity and background," said, Hana, who was born and raised in Kuala Lumpur.

According to the World Bank Report in September 2019, women only accounted for 35 per cent of the workforce in the technological field in Malaysia.

“It is no secret there is a shortage of women and diversity in IT, even more so in leadership roles. Despite society having progressed significantly, more needs to be done to create an inclusive environment where women are heard, respected, can grow their careers and take up leadership positions,” she told Bernama via e-mail.

Balance between work & family

According to the mother of two, as one of the decision-makers at Cisco, she has to strike a balance between her career and family.

“Being a full-time working parent, prioritisation and delegation are key in making sure you do not take it all on by yourself. The advice from an inspiring woman leader I met has set the tone for how I operate, that is, ‘Prioritise the things only you can do and delegate the rest.’

“Managing your time and investing in a support system is also important because it allows you the space to grow into the roles you are entrusted with.

“It is about letting go of perfection and understanding that it is okay to focus on what is best and most important for you and your family,” said Hana, who besides her mother and mother-in-law as her real-life role models, also looks to women leaders and icons like Michelle Obama, Sheryl Sandberg and Beyonce for inspiration.

Hana who holds a degree in Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science joined Cisco in 2019 and spent two and a half years leading the Asean Strategy and Operations team from the KL office.

She was appointed to her current position in 2021. As managing director, she is responsible for shaping Cisco’s strategic direction in Malaysia and driving the go-to-market strategy in the country.

Hana said, 45 per cent of Cisco’s executive leadership team are women and 54 per cent are diverse in terms of gender or ethnicity.

Gender equality at the workplace

Sharing tips as a female boss, Hana said within the organisation, it is crucial to foster a thriving workplace culture that celebrates diversity and inclusiveness for all at every level.

“Commitment from top leaders to prioritise these values and create gender-balanced organisations can further help more women to pursue their potential, including in leadership roles.

“What’s most important for leaders is that we lead with honesty and authenticity. As a leader, one can never please everyone but that does not mean you’re not doing it right.

“The perception of workplace leadership is changing, and we can be effective, impactful and strong leaders in our own unique way,” she said.

“You don’t need to tick all the boxes to get that promotion or go after that dream job. You just have to take the first step. Do not be afraid to be bold, even when you do not see anyone like you where you want to be.

“As women, we must craft our path. This includes finding our own meaning of role models by taking bits and pieces of inspiring leaders and making it our own story,” added Hana.

— Bernama

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