

Capabilities, not gender, define leadership qualities

MALAYSIA'S overall gender equality increased to 71.4% in 2020, according to the Women's Empowerment Statistics in Selected Domains, Malaysia, 2021 by the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**.

The Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) measures the gender gap in four sub-indices, namely economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; as well as political empowerment. A score of 1.0 (100%) implies that equality between men and women has been attained.

Chief statistician Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin said women outperform men in the Educational Attainment sub-index, with a score of 1.059. The sub-index of Health and Survival received a score of 0.956, followed by Economic Participation and Opportunity (score 0.738).

However, women's labour force participation (LFPR) remained low in 2020, at 55.3%, compared to comparable South-East Asian countries such as Singapore (69.7%) and Thailand (66.8%). Women's LFPR in industrialised countries generally surpasses 60%.

Political empowerment was rated as the lowest at 10% (score 0.100), indicating that women continue to trail behind men in ministerial and parliamentary positions.

To get more depth on the current women empowerment situation in Malaysia, The Malaysian Reserve (TMR) spoke to Malaysia Green Building Confederation (MGBC) VP Ar Dr Serina Hijjas who shared her experience in the property construction industry.

A Legacy

An all-rounder in school, she entered the industry due to her interest in arts and science. She also did double maths in college with physics and chemistry.

Being good in debate, Serina was contemplating between law and architecture, however, due to her father being a prominent figure in the architecture industry, she was undeniably influenced to take up the latter.

Her name is as well-known in the community as the structure that she has constructed, namely the Putrajaya Boulevard, Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC), Heriot-Watt University Malaysia, the 4G11 tower, Securities Commission building, Bank Negara's Sasana Kijang, as well as the Telekom Malaysia tower.

With more than 30 years of experience under her sleeves, she is involved in the in layup building construction, architecture design and planning. Apart from being the second-generation architect for HIJJAS Architects & Planners, Serina is also the chairman for the Green Building Index.

Commenting on the challenges that she has faced in the industry, Serina said that rather than the perception of competing against males, her challenge was more of carrying the Hijjas name.

"For me it is not so much the glass ceiling in male domination, but also there is a legacy. I carry the name Hijjas — I continue to carry the name Hijjas as an architecture practice. Though not alone, I am

very fortunate to have a few other directors in the team. I also cherish the position where I am allowed to lead my own company and have the support of my peers.

“I think no one can perform at their best without support — they do not see me as ‘she’s a woman’. Sometimes I find that when my work is not acknowledged and miscredited, being done by someone else (another female architect), I find that more disturbing than the perception of competing against male,” she told TMR.

Collaborative Work

Serina said it is obvious in the working industry that women architects are seen as good in particular areas, while males are better in other areas. Hence, she is a strong believer in collaborative work to get the best out of everyone.

On the added value brought into the industry as a person, Serina believes that she has brought a broader and more holistic approach to the building industry.

“I think this comes with a vision which is not carried by male or female specifically, but by an individual.

“I carry a vision — which probably started 30 years ago in sustainability even before it became some sort of an environmental, social and governance (ESG) requirement — and I have been championing it, developing it more and more over time,” she added.

Commenting on the societal expectation towards females in the industry, Serina said there is a small diminishing percentage of people that perhaps do not believe that women can take such roles.

Among the structure that Serena has constructed include the Heriot-Watt University Malaysia building by the lake in Putrajaya (pic source Heriot-Watt University Malaysia)

She said it is not a valid excuse to make as it just comes down to professionalism, either for male or female, and it comes down to an aptitude to continue to learn.

On her doubts about her leadership abilities throughout her career, Serina said being called into question on her performance and ethics is something that weighs her down.

“I think everyone faces judgments along their career path. As a person who is very performance-driven, when my professional performance is questioned, that is probably one of the biggest personal disappointments that I would feel.

“When you continue wanting to be better and put in the time (do not mind the 24/7), and you are being called into question on performance and ethics, that is a

very big deal. But at the end of the day, you get up and go again.”

To remain on top of the game, Serina’s advice is to continue expanding and not thinking we already know everything.

“I hope I have some humility. Apart from being very opinionated, I think being able to listen, to see that there is a better way and not always think that you have the answers to everything is key.”

More Women Coming Up in Construction

On how women will shape the future of Malaysia's construction industry, she said there are more women coming up in the industry.

"This year, we have a woman president for Board of Engineers Malaysia (BEM) and a woman president for an architecture association, so this generation is seeing more women wanting to step up to take leadership positions.

"I admit that at board level, there is still a low number of women involved. I believe women must be technically savvy in whatever industry they are in, to be on par with their male colleagues.

"I don't know why it is taking so long. When I was in university, the male-to-female architecture student ratio was 50:50, but women often dropped out mainly because of family obligations," she elaborated.

Serina noted that when it comes down to individuals, it boils down to his or her capabilities. Hence, she stressed that it is important to assess the individual's capability and not the perception that females cannot take the heat.

She recalled that when constructing the PICC, the project manager was a woman.

"It was a very tough job with 24 months to complete, and she had to manage all the contractors and construction workers.

"I don't believe the percentage of women in the construction side will expand much because it is hard labour, which women are not often keen on," she further explained.

Reminiscing about her early days in the industry, Serina's first job got her hooked on sustainability.

"I have been following that path since Day One but until today, I still question whether I am good enough or not," she shared with TMR.

Serina is always looking forward to the next project.

"People say your best achievements are what you can achieve right now, not what you have achieved back then," she concluded.

<https://themalaysianreserve.com/2022/11/14/capabilities-not-gender-define-leadership-qualities/>