

16/09/2003

Girl talk

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THE Malaysian woman is moving out of the kitchen and into the office.

According to statistics compiled by the Ministry of Women and Family Development Malaysia, the participation of women in the workforce has increased from 30.8% upon independence to 45.7% in 2002.

However, as pointed out by Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, lots more need to be done. Even today, less than half of the 7.4 million women aged between 15 and 64 are in the workforce. And except in accountancy, there are fewer women than men in professional fields. For example, women make up only 35% of lawyers, 33% of doctors, 18% of architects and 11% of engineers.

The number of women in decision-making positions is even smaller, she continued. Only 10% of politicians in the Dewan Rakyat are women, while, according to the ministry's research of 50 Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange-listed companies, about 12% of top-level management and 10.6% of directors are women.

These statistics are what prompted the ministry to hold the first Women's Summit on Women@Work, in conjunction with 'National Women's Day' on Aug 25, 2003, to explore contemporary issues and top-management concerns facing Malaysian women in business and the workplace.

The summit, which drew about 1,000 professionals from various corporate sectors, had a distinguished line-up of speakers, both local and international. The summit was divided into three sessions, entitled 'Super-achievers', 'Breaking the glass ceiling', and 'When a woman is the best man for the job'.

In the first session, the three women speakers talked about their journey to success, the lessons learnt and the experience gained.

Aishah Ahmad, the Director of Corporate Affairs Motor Group, Tractors Malaysia Sdn Bhd, shared how she got into the auto industry by chance and what it was like to be a 'rare species during that era'. Her childhood and upbringing was influential in her success, she said. 'My father taught me to be independent. It was good training by my father, as I have overcome almost all my fears now.'

Tracing her 25-year career, Aishah, who is also the president of the Malaysian Automotive Association, ended by saying, 'I am where I am today partly due to the fact that I am a team player. You must be approachable and humble enough to approach others.'

Datuk P G Lim, the first Malaysian Woman Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), drew lessons from the lives of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed and former British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill. 'In order to attain success, knowledge, ability, adaptability and hard work are the prerequisites,' said Lim, who called on women to be super-achievers in all fields of human endeavour.

Naina Lal Kidwai, managing director and vice chairman of HSBC Securities and Capital Markets India Pte Ltd, challenged women to be passionate about their work. 'We need to get out of our comfort zone; we need to push that little bit more; we need to dare that dream,' she said. 'Success is not the result of spontaneous combustion. It has to do with setting ourselves on fire.'

Rafiah Salim, the first Malaysian Woman UN Assistant Secretary-General, spoke about the ubiquitous glass ceiling that confines most women to middle-management positions. 'Although Malaysian women have been

recognised internationally as successful, we've still a long way yet to go,' she said. Companies and organisations should adopt affirmative action for women, such as the UN, which aims to have 50% of its decision-making positions filled by women. However, affirmative action should not be about meeting quotas, she said. 'We don't want women in position just because they are women but because we want the best person for the benefit of the country.'

On the same topic, Bridget Lai, country head of consumer banking at Standard Chartered Bank (M) Bhd, said women who have broken through the glass ceiling should be more supportive of other women. 'They must champion for other women. They must be mentors and role models to other women.'

The last session had four speakers - Dr Zaha Rina Zahari, chief operating officer of Malaysia Derivatives Exchange, Anu Aga, chairman of the Thermax Group of Companies in India, and two men, Jon Chadwick, chairman of Shell Malaysia, and Chan Voon Yong, president of the Young Entrepreneur Organisation Malaysian Chapter.

Despite being the lone thorns among the roses, the men rose to the occasion with passionate arguments for gender equality even amid differences. 'What shapes the future is not what we have in common, but the interplay of the differences,' said Chadwick. 'Business needs to work towards creating a workplace where differences are valued, in which everyone has the opportunity to develop talents and skills that are consistent with business values and objectives.'

The afternoon 'CEO Roundtable Dialogue' was attended by more than 200 top-level managers to discuss topics such as equity in the workplace, women entrepreneurs, women and the technology potential and 'how to be a person companies fight to keep'. Speakers included Leslie Mays, head of diversity and inclusiveness, Shell International, USA; Lucita S Lazo, regional programme director of UNIFEM, East and Southeast Asia; technopreneur Shekila Ramalingam; Yohani Yusof, consultant with Maxis Communications Bhd; and Louisa Wong-Rousseau, group managing director of Bo Le Associates.

Perhaps, what best summed up the theme of the day was Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in his opening speech at the summit. 'We often discuss gender equality here in Malaysia from the context of productivity and development and the need to harness all of our country's best resources,' he said. 'But as I have said before, the push for equity between the sexes must be embraced, not just because it is right for productivity and development, but simply because it is the right thing to do.'

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