

# They dared to take up public office

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Malaysiaku Gemilang

Founding Fathers

A weekly series

MANY more women contributed as mothers of independence than the list below. They know who they are and their families can testify to their sacrifices. This selection is based on the wide variety of backgrounds and political channels that women took when they first broke into public life.

#### Lady Rahiman Ariff (1900-1970)

First chairman of the Penang Malay Women's League. She organised Malay women in Penang into a welfare force, the basis for Penang's Wanita Umno, supporting the cause for independence.

#### Mrs B.H. Oon (d. 1979)

First Malayan woman lawyer, Federal Legislative Councillor (1948-55), Municipal Councillor (1954-57), founder of MCA branch in Province Wellesley (Seberang Prai). Contributed greatly to the campaign for Chinese citizenship especially during the Emergency.

#### Khatijah Sidek (1918-82)

Wanita Umno leader (1954-56), MP (1959-64). Firebrand politician from Sumatra whose speeches were legendary and who helped galvanise mass support for Merdeka. She turned to PAS when expelled from Umno in 1956, returning to the party in 1969.

#### Datuk P.G. Lim (b. 1915)

First Cambridge-trained woman lawyer, first Malaysian female ambassador (1973), founder member of the Labour Party, active in the union movements and led the way for the wider participation of women in politics.

#### Datuk Halimahton Abdul Majid (1920-1980s)

Federal Legislative Councillor, social activist, prominent Kaum Ibu Umno leader who helped pen the lyrics of Wanita Umno's anthem and pioneered Umno divisions in Negri Sembilan, Selangor and Pahang.

#### Puan Sri Janaky Athi Nahappan (Janaky Devar)

Founder member of the MIC. She is among the first Indian women to join the Indian National Army organised during the Japanese Occupation to liberate India and after World War II she emerged as a

welfare activist.

#### Tan Sri Aishah Ghani (b. 1923)

Wanita Umno chief. This outspoken politician often clashed with some of her male colleagues in politics yet elegantly discharged her duties as Minister for Social Welfare in the 1970s.

#### Tun Fatimah Hashim (b. 1924)

Wanita Umno chief, first female minister. Actively supported Tunku Abdul Rahman and was responsible for the massive female support at Merdeka campaigns; later joined the Cabinet as a full minister. Headed the National Council of Women's Organisations for 24 years.

#### Mrs F.R. Bhupalan (Rasammah Naomi Navarednam, b. 1927)

INA member and community leader who contributed to getting equal pay for women; tireless social welfare activist; articulate champion of women's causes. Fought in INA's Rani Jhansi Regiment and served in Burma during WWII.

#### Tan Sri Rosemary Chong (b. 1927)

First Wanita MCA president. A highly educated young woman at the time of independence, she was one of many social activists who supported the cause from behind the scenes; she later became the first non-Malay woman deputy minister.

#### Ibu Zain (Tan Sri Zainun Sulaiman, 1903-1989)

Wanita Umno chief, ardent nationalist. Coming from a privileged intellectual background, she was an enlightened if somewhat unorthodox educationist and one of the earliest Malay women to articulate nationalist concerns. Responsible for galvanising female support during Umno's formative years, she remained a spirited advocate of Malay education till the end of her life.

#### Toh Puan Umasundari Sambanthan (Umasundari d/o O.M. Subramaniam, b. 1929)

Activist, social worker and leading figure of the cooperative movement. Educated at Convent and Anglo-Chinese schools before WWII, she graduated with a degree in Chemistry from Madras University and studied for a Masters degree at the Presidency College, Madras.

#### Dr Soo Kim Lan (1894-1981)

First woman doctor in Malaya. Educated at King Edward VII Medical School in Singapore, she broke the male monopoly of the medical profession in Malaya at the time; involved in social work by developing public awareness on social hygiene, vaccination and family planning; and instrumental in setting up the Lady Templer Tuberculosis Hospital and its Morib Rehabilitation Centre.



**Women leaders:** 1. Tan Sri Aishah Ghani; 2. Tan Sri Rosemary Chong; 3. Toh Puan Umasundari Sambanthan; 4. Datuk P.G. Lim; 5. Mrs F.R. Bhupalan; 6. Ibu Zain; 7. Lady Rahiman Ariff; 8. Mrs B.H. Oon; 9. Dr Soo Kim Lan; 10. Puan Sri Janaky Athi Nahappan; 11. Datuk Halimahton Abdul Majid; 12. Khatijah Sidek; 13. Tun Fatimah Hashim