

Breaking the glass ceiling

More women are overcoming the inherent gender bias by taking up key positions in property and construction groups. **P.10-12**



Teh Lip Kim,
MD, Selangor
Dredging Bhd

Chua Elsie,
executive chairman,
Plenitude Bhd

Charmaine Lim
Puay Fung,
executive director,
Tittijaya Land Bhd

Dr Wan Maimun Wan Abdullah,
director, Ahmad Zaki Sdn
Bhd and president, Women in
Construction Malaysia

Monica Lai Voon Huey,
group deputy MD,
Ireka Corp Bhd

Succeeding in a man's world

- **Women leaders** are making their mark in the male-dominated property and construction sectors
- **They account** for 13-18% of the construction industry and the numbers are rising
- **Though some** experienced gender bias, tackling the challenges is key to women succeeding in the business



by **Sonia Ramachandran**

WOMEN are increasing their participation in the property and construction industries, long thought to be a male domain, with many serving as developers, contractors, engineers, quantity surveyors and architects.

They are said to make up between 13 and 18% of the construction industry, and the numbers are rising steadily.

FocusM research reveals that among property companies listed on Bursa Malaysia, women make up 31 executive directors, two executive chairmen, one deputy chairman, one vice-chairman three managing directors, and one deputy managing director.

In the case of listed construction companies, they make up 16 executive directors, one group deputy managing director and one group finance director (see table).

The increasing number of women holding senior executive positions in management and the boards of construction and property companies also prompted the 2015 establishment of an association – Women in Construction Malaysia – for them (see sidebar).

One of the earliest pioneers to forge a path for women in construction and property development was Puan Sri Chook Yew Chong Wen, 96.

The former executive chairman of Selangor Properties Bhd ventured into the field at a time when it was not considered *de rigueur* for women to do so.

She co-founded Selangor Properties with her late husband Wen Tien Kuang in 1963 when it was officially incorporated. However, the company's roots can be traced as far as a decade earlier.

Its earliest projects included the UK Heights and Bukit Tunku developments in Kuala Lumpur that have retained their exclusivity and stood the test of time.

At the time, Chook single-handedly managed all aspects of the operations herself and was said to be a hands-on leader who was very particular even of the smallest details.

The low profile matriarch retired from the board on Dec 27, last year.

Then there are the daughters and sisters who take after their famous fathers and brothers in the property industry.

While some may say that the family link for these women were stepping stones that helped launch their careers, success still comes only to those who earn it.

Sibling connection

A prime example is property developer Adenland Group of Companies director Clarissa WL Wong.

She says her brother Datuk Seri Eric WT Wong, a director and co-founder of the group, is one of the reasons she is in the business.

She says it is no easy feat to enter an industry where women are sometimes not taken seriously.

"The property industry is indeed a man's world, and the only way to be in it and survive is by proving your mettle.

"You have to do your job well and your homework. I had to make sure I proved myself and that I didn't give them [the men] room or opportunities to find any shortcomings in me," says Clarissa.

She chose to enter the field due to its potential compared to other types of businesses. "I also enjoyed the challenge of proving myself in a male-dominated industry.

"Whenever a woman says something or brings something to the table, she is sometimes not taken seriously.

"I have also encountered some men who are not keen to do business with a woman.

"In such instances, I have to think out of the box and find ways to get them to accept that I am here to do business, and am good at my job," she says.

While Clarissa agrees there are more women getting involved in property development, she says it is more in the management and back-end of property development and not so much in the project side of the business.

Asked if she would allow her only daughter to enter the field, Clarissa says: "I would prefer she marries a man who loves and spoils her to bits and who does not allow or need her to work. But if she is keen to join this line, I will encourage and support her."

Property daughters

The apple never falls far from the tree, and thus there are daddy's girls who follow their illustrious fathers' footsteps.

They include Selangor Dredging Bhd managing director Teh Lip Kim, daughter of the company's founder, the late Teh Kien Toh.

The family theme is also evident in construction and property group Ireka Corp Bhd. Its group deputy managing director Monica Lai Voon Huey and executive director Lai Man Moi are the daughter and sister respectively of the company's



More women are venturing into the male-dominated construction and property development industry

DDHCE/FOOL/SM

executive chairman and founder Datuk Lai Siew Wah.

Then there is the father-daughter team at MK Land Holdings Bhd where veteran property developer and co-founder Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal Bakar has, in recent years, handed the reins over to Felina Mustapha Kamal, who is now the executive chairman.

Country Heights Holdings Bhd is another company that has a father-daughter team with deputy chairman and director Lee Cheng Wen being the daughter of the founder and executive chairman Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew.

Meantime, Plenitude Bhd executive chairman Chua Elsie is an example of a woman who has made her mark in property development, having been appointed to the board in 2002.

Another is Titijaya Land Bhd executive director Charmaine Lim Puay Fung, the daughter of its group managing director Tan Sri Lim Soon Peng.

Selangor Dredging's Lip Kim says it was "perseverance" that allowed her to make it in a man's world.

"When I took over as managing director in July 1998, the tin market had collapsed and it was no longer viable to continue mining. On top of that, it was the height of the Asian financial crisis.

"I could have thrown up my hands and let the company crumble but I opted to do something else – consolidate the business



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– and hopefully put it back on the path to profitability," she says.

She also took risks when needed and always trusted her intuition.

Lip Kim says she faced many challenges in making her mark in the industry. Citing the 2008-2009 US sub-prime financial meltdown, she says that for nine months, the company failed to sell a single apartment or house.

"At that point, I could have

When you are equipped with the right knowledge and know how, people will look up to you, says Lip Kim



Women in Property Sector

NO.	COMPANY	NAME	DESIGNATION
1	BCB Bhd	Tan Lay Hiang	Executive Director
2	BCB Bhd	Tan Lindy	Executive Director
3	Berjaya Assets Bhd	Chryseis Tan Sheik Ling	Executive Director
4	Berjaya Assets Bhd	Koh Huey Min	Executive Director
5	Country Heights Holdings Bhd	Lee Cheng Wen	Deputy Chairman
6	Country Heights Holdings Bhd	Lee Sow Lin	Executive Director
7	Country View Bhd	Wong Joon Chin	Executive Director
8	DPS Resources Bhd	Datin Seri Chu Kim Guek	Executive Director
9	DPS Resources Bhd	Emily Sow Mei Chet	Executive Director
10	Gromutual Bhd	Chew Kwee Hiok	Executive Director
11	GSB Group Bhd	Andrea Gan	Managing Director
12	I-Bhd	Tey Siew Thuan	Executive Director
13	I-Bhd	Goh Yeang Kheng	Executive Director
14	IOI Properties Group Bhd	Lee Yoke Har	Executive Director
15	KEN Holdings Bhd	Lau Pek Ku	Executive Director
16	LBI Capital Bhd	Datin Low Wee Chin	Executive Director
17	LBS Bina Group Bhd	Datuk Cynthia Lim	Executive Director
18	Mah Sing Group Bhd	Leong Yuet Mei	Executive Director
19	Malaysia Pacific Corp Bhd	Datin Kong Yuk Chu	Vice Chairman and Executive Director
20	Malaysia Pacific Corp Bhd	Ch'ng Se Hua	Executive Director
21	Malton Bhd	Puan Seri Tan Kewi Yong	Executive Director
22	Menang Corp M Bhd	Marianna Aly Shun	Executive Director
23	MK Land Holdings Bhd	Felina Mustapha Kamal	Executive Chairman
24	Naim Holdings Bhd	Christina Wong Ping Eng	Executive Director
25	OSK Holdings Bhd	Puan Sri Khor Chai Moi	Executive Director
26	Plenitude Bhd	Chua Elsie	Executive Chairman
27	Seal Inc Bhd	Fang Siew Hong	Executive Director
28	Selangor Dredging Bhd	Teh Lip Kim	Executive Director/MD
29	Sunway Bhd	Sarena Cheah Yean Tin	Executive Director
30	TA Global Bhd	Kimmy Khoo Poh Kim	Executive Director
31	Talam Transform Bhd	Chua Kim Lan	Executive Director
32	Tambun Indah Land Bhd	Teh Theng Theng	Executive Director
33	Tiger Synergy Bhd	Tan Lee Chin	Managing Director
34	Tiger Synergy Bhd	Datin Sek Chian Nee	Executive Director
35	Titijaya Land Bhd	Charmaine Lim Puay Fung	Executive Director
36	Y&G Corp Bhd	Datin Seri Gan Li Li	Deputy MD
37	YTL Land & Development Bhd	Datuk Hamidah Maktar	Executive Director



Women in Construction Sector

NO.	COMPANY	NAME	DESIGNATION
1	Benalec Holdings Bhd	Lew Ai Lin	Executive Director
2	Crest Builder Holdings Bhd	Koh Hua Lan	Executive Director
3	DKLS Industries Bhd	Francisca Lo Fui Khui	Executive Director
4	DKLS Industries Bhd	Ding Soo King	Executive Finance Director
5	Econpile Holdings Bhd	The Kun Ann	Executive Director
6	Ekovest BHD	Datuk Paduka Lim Hoe	Executive Director
7	Gabungan AQRS Bhd	Ow Yin Yee	Executive Director & CFO
8	Gadang Holdings BHD	Kok Pei Ling	Executive Director & CFO
9	Ireka Corp Bhd	Lai Man Moi	Executive Director
10	Ireka Corp Bhd	Monica Lai Voon Huey	Group Deputy MD
11	Kerjaya Prospek Group Bhd	Datin Toh Siew Chuan	Executive Director
12	Kimlun Corp Bhd	Pang Chew Ngo	Executive Director
13	Merge Energy BHD	Razita Ahmad @Harun	Executive Director
14	Mitrajaya Holdings Bhd	Cho Wai Ling	Executive Director
15	MTD ACPI Engineering Bhd	Nik Firdaus Nik Hussain	Executive Director
16	Muhibbah Engineering M Bhd	Shirleen Lee Poh Kwee	Group Finance Director
17	Pintaras Jaya BHD	Khoo Yok Yee	Executive Director
18	Triple Bhd	Shamsiah Hashim	Executive Director



Five Stones in SS2, Petaling Jaya, turned out to be a major success for Teh and Selangor Dredging

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It is important, Charmaine says, for women not to set "glass ceilings" but use passion and perseverance to pursue the careers they want

done what most developers did and held back all new projects to conserve resources. Instead, I decided to launch a new project - Five Stones," she says.

The project cost the company an additional RM20-RM30 mil just for the sub-structure.

But Five Stones in SS2, Petaling Jaya, turned out to be a major success, with all 377 units sold within months, giving them the impetus to ride out the financial crisis and launch other projects.

"The success was made that much sweeter as it was a project that was entirely ours - from concept to design and execution," she says.

Knowledge and know-how

Lip Kim says she never faced any gender bias. "I believe that when you are equipped with the right knowledge and know-how, people will look up to you."

She advises women venturing into the field to be passionate about what they do and to work with diligence, integrity and never stop learning.

Titijaya's Charmaine says a successful career does not come easy for anyone, especially women.

This, she says, is because society generally believes they should end up as homemakers while men take the lead in the family, be it financially or in decision making.

"To prove to the world that we are as good as men, we have to break the common prejudices against women and prove our abilities, given the existing bias in many work cultures," she says.

Charmaine says she was fortunate to get into the family business 10 years ago as the industry is "traditionally male-dominated".

"The reality is that when you are surrounded by men, at first you will feel you have to prove yourself and once you have done that, it will be fine," she says.

It is important, Charmaine says, for women not to set "glass ceilings", and accept that the industry is male-dominated. Instead, they should use passion and perseverance to pursue the careers they want.

Recognise your talent

Having started her career in property development as a marketing executive for Titijaya Group in 2003, she says: "I hope women will recognise their talents, expertise and skills, and be results-oriented, instead of looking at gender," she says.

She says it was her father who inspired her to join the property industry. "My father took my brother and me along to many business functions and events.

"Our participation in some of them allowed us to learn by listening to the dialogues and discussions," she says.

Charmaine says there has to be creativity and innovation for one to make a mark in the property industry, and that gender bias has never bothered her.

"When we are working on a project, it is always about delivering results rather than thinking about whether it should be handled by a man or woman," she says.

Gender bias, she says, may exist in most corporations, but if the top-most company management exhibits gender diversity in decision making, it will trickle down and eliminate discrimination.

Then there are those who make their presence felt entirely on their own, rather than join the family business.

One such gutsy lady is quantity surveyor Dr Wan Maimun Wan Abdullah, who received the Construction Industry Development Board's Construction Leading Lady Award in 2014.

A director of construction firm Ahmad Zaki Sdn Bhd, Wan Maimun joined the Public Works Department upon graduation.

"The construction industry is the only one that I am familiar with and I love being a quantity surveyor involved in construction and being part of a project team," she says.

She says the major challenge for her was balancing a successful career and family life.

"We want to work our guts out

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Recognition comes with proving yourself

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and have a successful career, fight for what we believe, and at the end of the day go home to a happy and loving family.

"But as a woman, the constant juggling of roles such as daughter, wife, mother and caregiver is a challenge that requires superhuman effort.

"It calls for planning,



Most construction workers are men who sometimes ignore a woman's voice, says Norel

scheduling, multitasking, having a positive attitude and support from family and friends [and a good maid to do the housework!]," she says.

Only with all these in place was she able to involve herself in professional institutions and company boards, and focus on issues in the construction industry.

Many facets

She notes that there are more women getting involved in the construction industry as it offers many facets of the business.

"If being a contractor is not your cup of tea, then there are other equally interesting areas.

"This includes being developers, manufacturers, suppliers, consultants, specialists, construction lawyers, as clients, or even working within the statutory authorities or financial institutions," says Wan Maimun.

On whether she faced any gender bias, she says she just did what was required of her in the job to the best of her ability.

"I realised that once you proved yourself to be someone who performs and delivers, nobody can take that away from you.

For civil, electrical and mechanical contractor Norel Rais, the journey to be accepted in a man's world was a hard one.

"I worked hard to overcome the challenges in the industry. I learnt to stay calm and strong in handling clients and workers, especially men at the construction site.

"Most of them at the site are male, and they sometimes just ignored our voice.

"Working hours are unpredictable – sometimes I don't have time for my family or to give myself a treat," says Norel, who is a director and major shareholder of Pembinaan & Letrik Mals Sdn Bhd.

She says it is even worse when she has to travel outstation and leave her family for long periods.

Norel says she opted for the career as "it was the best opportunity for me to earn a better living instead of working with others".

"I found it difficult initially but with some guidance from my husband and project manager, I managed to handle everything smoothly," she says.

She says she has faced gender bias in her profession and advises women entering the construction industry to be strong physically and mentally to handle all situations.

Women, she says, also need to ensure they are knowledgeable, able to handle a big organisation and have the ability "to be a leader in a man's world". **FOCUSM**