

# SHE-EO! IN THE MAKING

WOMEN ENGINEERS SECTION

reported by



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Group photo sessions

**W** if you're always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be." – Maya Angelou.

This inspirational quote by activist Maya Angelou pretty much sums up the key take away based on what was gathered from an event titled "Breaking the Ceiling – Women Empowerment Session". Organised by NACE Founding Malaysia Section in collaboration with IEM Women Engineers Section, the inaugural session was held on 12 July, 2018, at the NACE EAP office in Kuala Lumpur.

Professional women (and men) came together for a three-hour breakaway programme designed to help participants reflect on their respective career paths and to become women leaders of the future. There were engagement sessions with three prominent speakers – Elaine Bowman and Helena Seelinger (NACE International, USA) and Anita Ahmad (Senior VP of Yayasan Hasanah, Malaysia) – in an informal, interactive set up.

As I had been raised by a single mother, I could personally relate to the topic of women empowerment. Under certain circumstances, women can stand up and independently navigate their lives to nurture the future generation. Empowered women can do wonders. Feminist G.D. Anderson said: *"Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength."*

However, in Malaysia, and to some extent Asia Pacific, there is a significant gender gap in the current management scenario of the corporate world. Based on a US study shared by Helena Seelinger, "1 out of 3 girls are afraid to lead while 46% of girls do not want to speak up because they want to be liked".

This was somewhat true as most of the women participants at the event admitted to being a part of the statistics in some way or another. Born and raised in Asian cultures, my women colleagues and I had been taught that our roles would be

merely as backbench supporters of our spouse/male counterparts and that we should stay in the shadows. The term "househusband" is relatively new in our society although statistics show an increase in women enrolment in universities, outnumbering male enrolment by more than 25% [Ref.1].

In Malaysia, since 2010, the FLPR (Female Labour Force Participation Rate) has steadily risen from 46.8% in 2010 to 54.1% in 2015; this translates to an additional 750,000 women in our workforce, which is estimated to contribute an additional 0.3% growth in gross domestic product in our economy. Yet, as of June 2016, women accounted for only 15.2% of director positions in the top 100 listed companies on Bursa Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange) [Ref.1].

The perception persists that if a woman manager is outspoken and an extrovert, she will be labelled as aggressive or bossy; the office environment too does not usually facilitate excellence in her work delivery. If we look specifically at the STEM field, as presented in the recent WiSET conference, female graduate engineers add up to approximately 32% of graduates, yet there are only 6.34% female professional engineers [Ref. 2].

Indeed, women are significantly under-represented in the boardroom and as chief executive officers but it has been observed that there is an increase in the number of women in top management, given recent progresses in strengthening the pipeline of female talent. Anita talked about the trials and tribulations of her career with numerous NGOs, a field dominated by males.

The key highlights shared by the three speakers were intimate insights into their own journeys to top positions in their organisations. Elaine Bowman, who comes from Texas, is the only female president of her organisation in its 75 years of existence. In IEM, we have yet to elect a woman as president.

Policies and practices of having a career sponsor, mentor mentee and quota system do help set the focus right in promoting more women leaders. It is also promising to see that more corporate sectors are implementing work-life balance and flexi-working arrangements to leverage career retention and development for career women. We must continue to persevere in creating greater awareness and to advocate all key stakeholders. It starts with you and me; as a whole women community, we have to help each other. Together, we can expand our network so that this issue will remain at the top of the agenda for the corporate sector and policy makers. ■