

Growing force of women entrepreneurs

What drives most is the desire to be financially independent and what they need to guard against is the tendency to 'mother' their staff

→ **FOR** many people, 1997 was not a good year. It marked the onset of the Asian financial crisis which badly hit the economies of many East Asian countries. It was also a very bad year for Kiong Kuan Yew as the plastic manufacturing company she had worked for during the past 26 years closed down.

Having worked her way up from a clerk to a managerial position, Kiong was out of a job at the age of 46 without a certificate of higher education and no experience in any other field.

Aggravating the situation, her family had a lot of debts so she decided that her only option was to start a business.

She relied on her experience and knowledge in the plastic industry to open a factory called A&A Plastic Industries Sdn Bhd which had three new machines to make plastic bottles and package them.

It was a tough time for a woman to strike out on her own but Kiong persevered. In 2000, however, she finally caved in to the various pressures of handling a business that had an extremely tight cash flow.

Luckily, her daughter Annette Tan Lee Ping was there to help out. She handled the marketing and sales while Kiong focused on the company's finances, and eventually the business stabilised. Kiong officially retired in 2007, and Tan took over the reins of the business.

Kiong's story is one of many examples of women venturing into business by holding onto hope despite the daunting challenges.



by CALYN YAP



by BEHONICE BEH

Women entrepreneurs tend to develop a 'mother syndrome', where they care too much about the needs of their staff instead of prioritising the businesses' needs, says Nuraziah

The feminine touch

While many assume women become entrepreneurs to spend more time at home with their children, Association of Bumiputera Women Entrepreneur Network of Malaysia (Wena) president Nuraziah Shamsul Baharin believes otherwise, as owners of a small company typically end up spending twice as much time working to manage everything.

She says that women entrepreneurs tend to develop a "mother syndrome", where they care too much about the needs of their staff instead of prioritising the needs of the business.

"There is no right or wrong if you want to play a mother role in your business... you become a business owner as you want to run it the way you want to," she adds.

On differences between male and female bosses, Tan says: "Women can sometimes make faster decisions than men, who typically look at the bigger picture and neglect the smaller details. On the other hand, we are more meticulous, and tend to focus on aspects such as staff relationships."

Nuraziah warns that women have to be wary in their dealings with others, adding: "Women care more about certain aspects of the business, apart from the operations, which makes us unique. However, we must not carry too much on our back as people tend to take advantage of that."

Ngee Ming Shoe Manufacturers Sdn Bhd's second-generation owner Lisa LH Fong says that instead of facing hurdles as a woman entrepreneur, her gender often works to her benefit as men tend to be more soft-spoken and reasonable when speaking with women. The family business was started 50 years ago and manufactures modern safety shoes for industry wear.

"I've been in the business for more than 20 years, and I find that a woman in a man's world has a better advan-



Women just need a nudge in the right direction - through awareness programmes or networking sessions - as well as capital to start their own businesses

tage. They're more receptive and there are usually no negative attitudes," she notes.

This is a view that Tan echoes: "It's easier for suppliers and customers to deal with me, because there are not many women in this industry. There's always room for discussion because they're usually not as harsh with women."

Work and life balance

There is a view that women with little to no experience in the corporate world fear ambition and hesitate in the decision-making process. This, in turn, could lead to indecisiveness for future planning.

A&A Plastic Industries' Tan disagrees as she says that women who want to be financially independent are often strong and self-sufficient, a view supported by Fong who adds that women can make equally aggressive business decisions but are generally more careful.

However, Tan says it is often difficult for women to juggle between work and family, and offers the opinion that women have to choose one or the other.

"It's a good thing for women to have their own businesses so they can be financially independent, but it's really



Fong studied shoe designing in England at a time where the course was not available locally

about whether they put their family or career first. You can't handle both at the same time, since growing a business while looking after a family is very taxing and you'll burn out in the end," she explains.

Women in the workforce

WHEN it comes to discussions about women in the workforce, the proverbial glass ceiling never fails to make an appearance. However, an increasing number of women are turning away from the corporate world to kick off their own entrepreneurial journey, where the glass ceiling ceases to exist and they can be the one to call the shots.

In June 2011, the Malaysian government set a target of 30% by 2016 for the representation of women on senior decision-making and corporate boards. This mandate, however, is not reflected in SMEs, as statistics show women falling behind male counterparts in running their own business.

Based on the 2011 SME Census by SME Corporation Malaysia (SME Corp), only about 19.7% of total SMEs

in Malaysia are women-controlled. This refers to enterprises with a woman having equity of 51% and above, or in which a woman is the CEO with equity ownership of at least 10%.

Women-owned SMEs are apparent mainly in the services sector (91.7%), followed by the manufacturing sector (6.9%). They are less involved in the construction, agriculture, and mining and quarrying sectors.

However, the figures could be understated. There are many women-owned enterprises in the food-and-beverage business that are not registered and are thus classified by the government as being in the informal sector, such as micro-SMEs and small office home office (SoHo) businesses usually run as side businesses.





SHARIL AMIN ABDUL RAHIM/FOCUSM

"One of the main reasons women like me choose to start our own businesses is the freedom to choose who, when and how we work," she says.

Women entrepreneurs tend to start their businesses organically as they are risk-averse and are content to stay in a safe environment where they are able to grow further.

"Unless they come from the corporate world with experience in a certain field, women rarely pursue a different scope of business and stick to what they know," she comments, on why most women entrepreneurs start venture into the food and beverage (F&B), fashion and beauty industries.

Growing a business

Women bosses, Nuraziah states, should empower staff to grow independent from the management in making day-to-day decisions and learning from mistakes.

This is something that A&A Plastic Industries' Tan believes in as well. "My vision is to make my staff independent so that the company can run without my presence, and I can diversify into another business," she says, adding that companies in which the key person has too strong a presence will not be sustainable in the long run when that person retires.

Fong adds that it is important to go for export, as the local market is too saturated, which is why Ngee Ming Shoe Manufacturers exports more than 20% of its products to Thailand, Singapore and even Fiji.

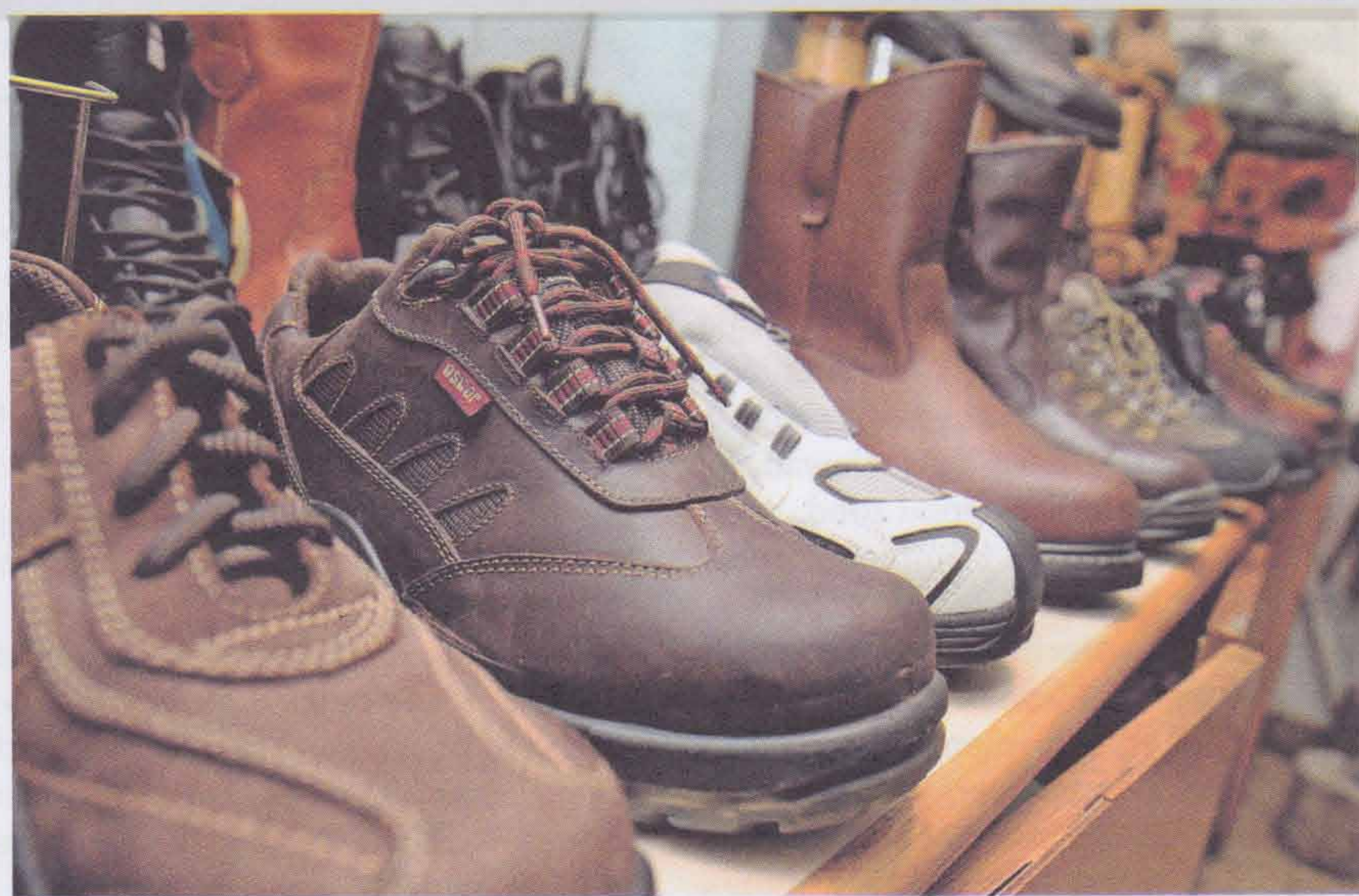
"We also have plans in the near future to export to Europe, and next month we're going to Germany for exhibitions. We try to go every two years so that we can keep ourselves up to date on shoe designs and technologies, so that we don't get left behind," she says, sharing that the company is on the right track to expansion with a new factory in the works, which is expected to be ready in one-and-a-half years.

Nuraziah emphasises that women entrepreneurs need to have a business plan in order to have a good grasp of what to expect in their pursuits.

"It is critical to know where your money is coming from and how you are going to market your products and services. Be like a man, have a support network. If you do not have the skills to run your business, join business associations that are able to support you through their activities," she advises.

For example, one of the ongoing programmes by SME Corp this year is

SHARIL AMIN ABDUL RAHIM/FOCUSM



Ngee Ming Shoe Manufacturers focuses on the creation of modern and fashionable safety shoes

Challenges accessing govt aid

THE government has several different initiatives aimed at women entrepreneurs, including the Malaysia External Trade Development Corp's Malaysia Women in Export Directory and the Get Malaysian Business Online (GMBO) programme spearheaded by Google Malaysia, as well as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), among many others.

The GMBO programme grants RM1,000 to micro-entrepreneurs, and women are given priority. A&A Plastic Industries Sdn Bhd's Annette Tan Lee Ping says while these initiatives are all very well, it is often difficult to apply for them. "I don't think we benefit a lot from it," she adds.

Financial support from the government and banks remains problematic, and it is often difficult for women to apply for funds.

For Tan in particular, "I've tried applying for such women-centric loans but they say that our industry is high-risk owing to the fluctuation of prices for petroleum and other raw materials; they don't want to take us on."

On the other hand, Ngee Ming Shoe



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Manufacturers Sdn Bhd owner Lisa LH Fong says Matrade's efforts, for one, are very positive and encouraging for any export-ready SME in the country. However, any additional incentives or grants introduced by the government would be welcome, she adds.

the Women Entrepreneur Networking Synergy Programme. This programme aims to gather women entrepreneurs together for a sharing session chaired by an industry leader. This year, SME Corp pegs retail as a potential sector for participants as the seminar moves across various states in the country.

Building confidence

Women entrepreneurs argue that the glass ceiling is non-existent for those looking to start out on their own. What is lacking is the confidence and hunger to succeed.

"A male-run business grows bigger as compared to a female-run establishment as they put all their effort into it. As a woman, we may not want to sacrifice as much as we juggle between our roles as a mother and business owner," shares Nuraziah.

Moreover, the lack of role models for women to follow could also be a reason they are apprehensive to desire more from their undertakings.

"Our measurement of success should not be limited to AirAsia's Tony Fernandes. We need to have leaders who have attained a certain level of success for women to look up to. These women need to be successful in their own right," she says.

Fong feels that women do have role models, pointing out there are a lot of successful women entrepreneurs.

"For example, my industry – the shoe industry – is a male-dominated industry, but I've taken up the vision to grow the business. It's very challenging, yes, but it's also very fulfilling. Perhaps it's because of my mother's encouragement since I was young, where she constantly reminded me that women can do as well, or even better, than men," she shares.

She further says that an individual's convictions depend on the way they were raised, and have nothing to do with gender, but with what that individual wants to achieve. If a child

is taught to be self-sufficient and independent from a young age, it does not matter whether they are male or female, since they would be able to make the necessary decisions.

She adds: "More women are entering non-traditional industries and it'll only increase in the future. It all depends on the individual, if they have the vision to focus on what they want to do."

In the end, regardless of gender, the essentials of running a business remain the same, with every founder having to have a strong vision and passion to go into business and formulating forward-looking plans to ensure the company's growth and sustainability.

What is really needed for women entrepreneurs are perhaps more opportunities to network, as well as education and raising awareness, to nudge them along the right path to starting their own entrepreneurial journeys. **FOCUSM**



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