

# Eight trailblazers inducted into Singapore Women's Hall of Fame

There are still hurdles in the way of women achieving their full potential: President

**Tham Yuen-C**  
Senior Political Correspondent

When Madam Saleha Mohamed Shah became a journalist in the 1950s, the workplace was very much a man's world.

Women were expected to get married and bear children, and only about one in five women of working age was employed. That was precisely why she found it important to buck the trend.

"There was no place for women then. But I wanted to show society that women could also do what men could," said the 86-year-old, who hoped to pave the way for women to be treated equally.

Women like Ms Lee Mei Yi, who faced fewer obstacles because of her gender when she joined the Republic of Singapore Air Force in 2004.

Madam Saleha and Ms Lee, 38, were among eight trailblazers who were inducted into the Singapore Woman's Hall of Fame on Wednesday, which is also International Women's Day. The others honoured for breaking barriers were fashion designers Celia Loe and Esther Tay, early childhood education pioneer Khoo Kim Choo, humanitarian worker Janet Lim, artist Amanda Heng, and author and playwright Ovidia Yu.

President Halimah Yacob, speaking at the ceremony held at the Istana, said that while women in Singapore have achieved significant progress over the years, there are still gender stereotypes and barriers that limit their ability to achieve their full potential.

Citing the shortage of women in leadership positions, she hoped



President Halimah Yacob and SCWO president Junie Foo (front row, second from right) with seven of the eight inductees: (front row from left) early childhood education pioneer Khoo Kim Choo; Madam Saleha Mohamed Shah, who became a journalist in the 1950s; fashion designer Celia Loe; and (back row from left) author and playwright Ovidia Yu; humanitarian worker Janet Lim; fashion designer Esther Tay; and RSAF Senior Lieutenant-Colonel Lee Mei Yi. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

that work to introduce workplace fairness legislation and to entrench flexible work arrangements will encourage women to participate more fully in the workplace.

A common theme running through the stories of the women celebrated on Wednesday was their refusal to accept gender norms of their time.

Madam Halimah highlighted how Madam Saleha, at age 10, stood her ground and fought against the practice at that time for Malay girls to be married off at puberty.

Ultimately, gender equality and

the empowerment of women go beyond legislation and policies, said Madam Halimah.

"A whole-of-society effort is needed to engender broader mindset shifts, such as breaking gender stereotypes and traditional expectations of roles that men and women play," she added.

Ms Lim, 72, who rose to assistant high commissioner of the United Nations Refugee Agency and still does ad hoc work for the agency in her retirement, said: "Don't just accept preconceived ideas. Even if there is an apparent obstacle, one can find ways to overcome it."

Sharing a similar sentiment was

Ms Yu, 61, who has been described as Singapore's first truly feminist writer and whose historical murder mystery series Crown Colony has been optioned by an international production company for TV. She said: "If you just go along with the tide and don't even try, you may not realise what you can do."

Ms Lee, who is a senior lieutenant-colonel and the first woman in Singapore to become a fighter squadron commander, said she looks forward to the day when there will no longer be the need to talk about the first woman to achieve success in male-dominated areas.

Her advice to young women: "Take a chance, dare to dream and don't be afraid to try something different."

The Hall of Fame was launched by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) in 2014 to celebrate the achievements and contributions of women, and to document and share their stories. Since then, 182 women have been honoured.

SCWO president Junie Foo said: "It is important that young girls have role models to look up to, to learn from."

yuenc@sph.com.sg