

# SUSTAINABILITY BRIEF

## OCTOBER 2020

### **Breaking the Glass Ceiling**

#### **The Women of Wilmar**

*by Kimberly Tan Lee Wern*

As a fresh graduate filled with professional aspirations, I was often daunted by possible career challenges ahead. During my interview with Wilmar, the question was posed to me:

*“Would you be comfortable working or being in an environment that is male-dominated?”*

This was asked perhaps to give me an expectation of the work environment. I recall feeling a little concerned when the question came up, but I brushed it aside and decided to face the potential challenge head-on.

Upon joining Wilmar, I was posted to its Sapi oil palm plantation estate in Sabah where I was pleasantly surprised to discover that there were plenty of women who helped form the backbone of operations in a male-majority environment. As my journey continued, I soon learnt that there were many women actively contributing to Wilmar’s success and in every layer of the organisation. I had the privilege of meeting, and even spending some time with several of my female colleagues which allowed me to gain insights into their inspirational experience working in a plantation.



*Marcie Elene (far right) leads Wilmar's conservation work in Sabah. Here she is in a Wilmar forest conservation area setting up a camera trap for monitoring wildlife.*

In many plantation companies in Indonesia and Malaysia, it is fairly normal to see women working in fertiliser and chemical application. Since joining Wilmar in 2016, I have also witnessed women operating heavy machinery and tractors expertly, and women in both managerial and engineering roles in the mills and refineries. We also have women trudging and powering through rough, and at times dangerous, jungle tracks to carry out conservation-related activities. We even have women who are card-carrying Wildlife Wardens in Sabah authorised to not only arrest those suspected of wildlife trafficking, but to also stop any type of vehicle, including aeroplanes from taking off!



*(From left) Nilar applying fertiliser in our estate in Indonesia; Samsiah, who is a sprayer in our estate in Malaysia; Ing. Ami Priyani, who is the Region GIS Coordinator in Indonesia and; Marian Boateng, who is an Electrical Engineer in our Ghana operations.*

In a plantation estate, it is the women in the supporting services who are the everyday heroes. Women predominantly form the core of the educators in the Wilmar-supported schools in the estates. Similarly, while we generally have male visiting doctors attend to the clinics in our plantations, it is women who make up the majority of the medical assistants at the front-line taking care of the health of our workers and their families. Thanks to these women - the teachers, the medical assistants, and the creche caretakers - other women who are mothers, are able to head to work with peace of mind that their children are in good hands.

Wilmar's 2019 [Sustainability Report](#) includes the statistic that 25.6% and 13.7% of the workforce in our palm oil and sugar operations respectively are women. The reality is that the agriculture sector is still very much male-dominated. However, what I have experienced is that there is a growing recognition of the importance of women working in this industry. While women in agriculture largely fill roles that are supporting in nature, women are also increasingly taking on leadership roles.

When I started writing this piece, I was focussing on women in our plantation operations but in the course of researching, I became aware of many inspiring women working in our corporate offices. I reached out to some of them to learn about their journey while seeking guidance for my own career path. These women have all worked incredibly hard and it is this tenacity that has led them to these leadership roles in Wilmar.

Ms Ahua Lie Hong Hwa is the Assistant General Manager for Trading (Laurics). Throughout her career with Wilmar which spans well over 20 years, she has amassed experience from working in several divisions, from operations to logistics and finally to the commercial desk. She has personally experienced the growth of Wilmar from, in her own words, a "small palm oil company" to the multinational agri-food company it is today.

Over the years, she has witnessed an increasing number of women performing well in what used to be perceived as male-dominated roles. She believes that capability and potential should be valued over gender and moving up the corporate ladder is a given if you are good for the role and responsibility.

Her advice is that we must continue learning new skills, be open to opportunities and not be afraid to take on new challenges.

Ms Chew Yin Peng, who is our Deputy Chief Information Officer, shared that although the Information Technology (IT) field is typically male-dominated, her experience in Wilmar thus far has been positive and opportunities avail based on capabilities.

She believes that it is important to not limit oneself to roles that you think you can do or what have been assigned to you. Keep an open mind and challenge yourself to explore uncharted grounds, especially when you are young, and not be afraid to proactively seek opportunities for progression.

She added, “Practise what you preach and lead by example. If you want to be respected, then do the same to others. Treat everyone equally.”

I also caught up with Ms Xu Meilin, General Manager of Wilmar’s office in Stockton, California, who oversees the vegetable oils business and refinery operations in North America. Fresh out from school, she joined Wilmar as a management trainee and had opportunities to work in various business segments that entailed business travels to Africa and a stint in Rotterdam, before her posting to the United States.

She advocates the importance of taking action to create shared value, which will lead to the development of a homogenous group that allows people to identify with one another, while providing a safe environment for them to speak up and share their ideas.

She also believes that we should not be afraid to put ourselves out there, ask for help or get out of our comfort zone. We must develop our self-worth by knowing our value and be able to articulate that value.



*(From left) Ahua Lie Hong Hwa, Assistant General Manager, Trading – Laurics; Chew Yin Peng, Deputy CIO; Xu Meilin, General Manager of Wilmar Oil & Fats (Stockton) and; Teo La-Mei, Executive Director*

I also had the privilege to speak to Ms Teo La-Mei, Executive Director of Wilmar, who generously shared her pearls of wisdom. She strongly advocates good communications, as it is important to be able to clearly articulate oneself while offering a point of view. As we progress in our careers, from managing a team and ultimately leading at an organisational level, we require increasing skill and capabilities in communication. In addition, when necessary, we must be able to make a stand, be comfortable with productive conflict and learn to influence others.

She further added that communication alone will not suffice to fully progress into leadership roles, as building relationships that are based on trust and respect is just as critical. The secret is to simultaneously build communication skills and relationships, so that our input and perspectives are sought after and respected.

My takeaway from my own experience and the dialogues that I had with my fellow women colleagues is that the sky is the limit for women in the workforce. While it may be unfashionable to talk about male-



dominated workforces, this is still the reality. It is important for employers to recognise that there needs to be a focus on accepting the fact that women are different – not just biologically, but also in the way we think and strategise, and how our roles as daughters, wives and mothers can have a positive impact on the decisions we make at work. It is only with this recognition that we can dismantle this archaic mindset that continues to cast a shadow on women’s professional representation.

The one common thread among the women I have spoken to is how facing and overcoming challenges is a key requirement for women to be successful in the workplace. On top of working hard and being enthusiastic about new challenges, this is what sticks to my mind: We need to recognise our value and contributions towards the organisation we work for and this requires us to first acknowledge the specific challenges that women face.

Thinking back to the original question that I was asked by my boss, Ms Perpetua “Pep” George, General Manager for Group Sustainability, during my interview, I now understand that she asked that question to help guide me, to give me a sense that it is important to be heard, and to be firm when put in a male-dominated environment.

Pep spearheaded the development of the Wilmar Women’s Charter, and she heads up the Women’s Committee Steering Group that oversees the implementation of the Women’s Charter in our upstream operations. Pep is passionate about supporting women and sustainability. This comes through clearly in our work together. She pushes us hard in the sustainability team, but she is also a “builder”, and I appreciate the nurturing that she has brought to this role as a woman. She says that her career has been built around other women helping her open doors and encouraging her. She was led by other women in her career, and she believes it is important to pay it forward. I hope to do the same.



*Members of Wilmar’s Women Committee Steering Group (WCSG) after our first meeting in 2019, which was led by Ms Perpetua (front row, centre) and joined by our colleagues from our Malaysian and Indonesian operations, including myself (last row, far right).*

Together with the rest of the women in Wilmar, we celebrate International Day of the Girl on 11 October and we encourage girls all over the world to reach for the skies. Doors are being opened for girls and women every day, and we must work to ensure we can help keep those doors open for future women to also achieve their dreams.



**Happy International Day of the Girl!**

Sincerely,  
Kim