

A vibrant illustration featuring several women of diverse ethnicities and styles. In the top left, a woman wears a light green hijab and a pink top. Next to her, a woman has a white flower in her dark hair. In the center, a woman with dark curly hair and white-rimmed glasses looks forward. To her right, a woman with short pink hair and large green earrings is shown in profile. Below her, a woman with dark hair is seen from the back, making a peace sign. At the bottom, a woman in a blue hijab is visible. The background is a mix of red, pink, and teal colors.

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LEADING LADIES

Exceptional women are making a mark in diverse industries and proving that gender should not be a limiting factor for ambition and accomplishment.

Women have come a long way from the days when their roles were limited to the home. Today, women excel in all careers, pursue their dreams and make a name for themselves. The sky is the limit. In conjunction with International Women's Day on the 8th of March, we speak to three outstanding and accomplished Malaysian women who share their life journeys, achievements, hopes for the future and passions.

TIRELESS DEVOTION TO EDUCATION

Dato' Professor Dr Elizabeth Lee is a force to be reckoned with in education. Under her leadership since 1992, the Chief Executive Officer of the Sunway Education Group (SEG) has steered the institution into a dynamic group of 17 institutions in various states, including Sunway University.

Education runs in her family. Lee's mother was

a teacher, and her father worked in the publishing industry. She attributes her parents as the key influence in her decision to be an educator.

"My earliest childhood memories involved recreating the classroom environment in my bedroom with dolls and teddy bears and marking books with a red pen. I was an avid reader," says Lee.

"However, my mum actually put me off being a teacher at one point when she casually says: "Being a teacher is a good career for women because it means you can go home and take care of your family after a half day's work."

"I did not want a half-hearted career as I wanted to plunge myself fully into my education career which then allowed me to fully and truly enjoy my occupation. To me, education has the power to change lives. And soon it was clear that education would be my chosen career," she adds.

Studying abroad made her much more aware of the inequalities in the system. She specifically chose to read for a degree in multicultural differences in school education and then went on to research more on closing the gap on language acquisition itself.

After graduating with a Master of Philosophy in Education from the University of Cambridge, Lee had great plans to enhance the teaching of the English language and took delight in sparking interest in critical thinking and instilling knowledge-seeking research among her students.

"I had the privilege to be chosen for institutional leadership before the age of 30. It was a tremendous learning curve and I'm grateful to all my bosses always for the opportunity to learn, grow, and contribute.

Lee's Twitter profile describes her as 'simply, a teacher at heart', "I have remained true to that calling. I have so many hopes and dreams which I can't realise them all in just this one lifetime but I can hopefully impact and inspire an army of students to do so. My students' success becomes my success," she says.

Lee's years with Sunway Education Group witnessed many international partnerships forged with top institutions and professional bodies from the United Kingdom, Australia, and more. Private higher education was still a novelty at the time and the start of what would become a vital transnational education (TNE) sector. It also saw the immense growth of 'twinning degree



Dato' Professor Dr Elizabeth Lee,
CEO of Sunway Education Group

programmes', which provided global yet affordable education access to students from all walks of life.

In her illustrious education career, Lee has received many international and local awards and accolades. In 2016, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Victoria University in recognition of her role as a distinguished educator and for her work in promoting international education and issues relating to the education of women.

Her international engagements have included speaking at Harvard Business School, the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, and the University of Edinburgh. An advocate for women in leadership, Lee serves as a mentor in the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales

"Education is my passion and it has not changed over the years. I'd choose the same if I were to start all over again."

(ICAEW), a global programme for specially chosen female corporate leaders.

She received the Visionary Women Leadership Award at the 2nd World Women Leadership Congress and Award (WWLCA), Women Entrepreneur in Canadian Education, the Malaysian Chinese Women of Excellence Award in Education, Educationist of the Year at the Sin Chew Education Awards 2019 and more recently in 2021, Leadership Commitment for Malaysia by UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific-Women's Empowerment Principles (WEP).

"I take a stand for women not just because I am a woman, but because I believe a woman has so much to give, if not even more, and should be given equal opportunity.

She says men and women have different perspectives and different approaches to



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solving problems. These various perspectives encourage creativity and innovation in the workplace, hence highlighting the need to rethink gender stereotyping and perceived mindsets. Studies have shown having both genders in the workplace improves collaboration, knowledge, talents and skills.

“We should all look into improving policies in supporting gender equality, as well as diversity and inclusion. We should be continuously moving forward in empowering and enabling men as well as women in the workplace,” she says.

Perceptions and mindsets need to be changed, and women ought to take themselves and their careers seriously in order to be considered and accepted for the job, responsibilities and eventually leadership, she says.

Lee believes one can successfully juggle both family and careers.

“It is not easy, but it is possible. Support from family, friends and employers, plus a creative and innovative approach to juggling the responsibilities as well as the additional positive and optimistic attitude helps.”

Speaking from personal experience, Lee had to juggle and is still juggling a career as well as being a wife and mother. She tries always to be there for her three daughters and not miss any major events they are involved in so they feel supported emotionally.

“Education helps define

people and bring people together. But we must find solutions to the challenges we face in providing quality education, ensuring equitable access regardless of socioeconomic background, and providing the necessary resources for educators to nurture our future generations to come.

“There is much work to be done, but I am feeling confident and energised for the year to come. The thought of empowering our

“To me, success and accomplishment is when what we do impacts our nation, the world, and humanity as a whole.”



Ts Dr Mahaletchumy Arujanan, Executive Director and Global Coordinator for International Service of Acquisition of Agribiotech Applications.

children and students has always and will continue to drive me ahead,” she concludes.

DYNAMIC AMBASSADOR OF SCIENCE

From her academic training in microbiology, biochemistry, and biotechnology, Ts Dr Mahaletchumy Arujanan has found a passion and niche in science communication.

Arujanan, 53, is the Executive Director and also the Global Coordinator for International Service for the Acquisition of Agribiotech Applications (ISAAA). Her extensive roles cover areas such as strategic partnerships and collaboration, enabling policies and regulations, commercialisation of research, and technopreneurship to name a few.

Hailing from Klang, she was influenced by her father, a headmaster who believed in education who let her dream big and encouraged her take up challenges in life. After her degree in Microbiology and Biochemistry, she pursued her Masters in Biotechnology at the University of Malaya.

“I wanted to be in a field that is still new and help build it in Malaysia. But instead of developing the technology, I became an advocate who supports its development and adoption, as I didn’t see myself being in the laboratory for the rest of my career,” she says.

After a short stint in a multinational company that exposed her to European work culture, she joined Malaysian

Biotechnology Information Centre (MABIC) as a project officer. Her current company ISAAA, is the parent company of MABIC.

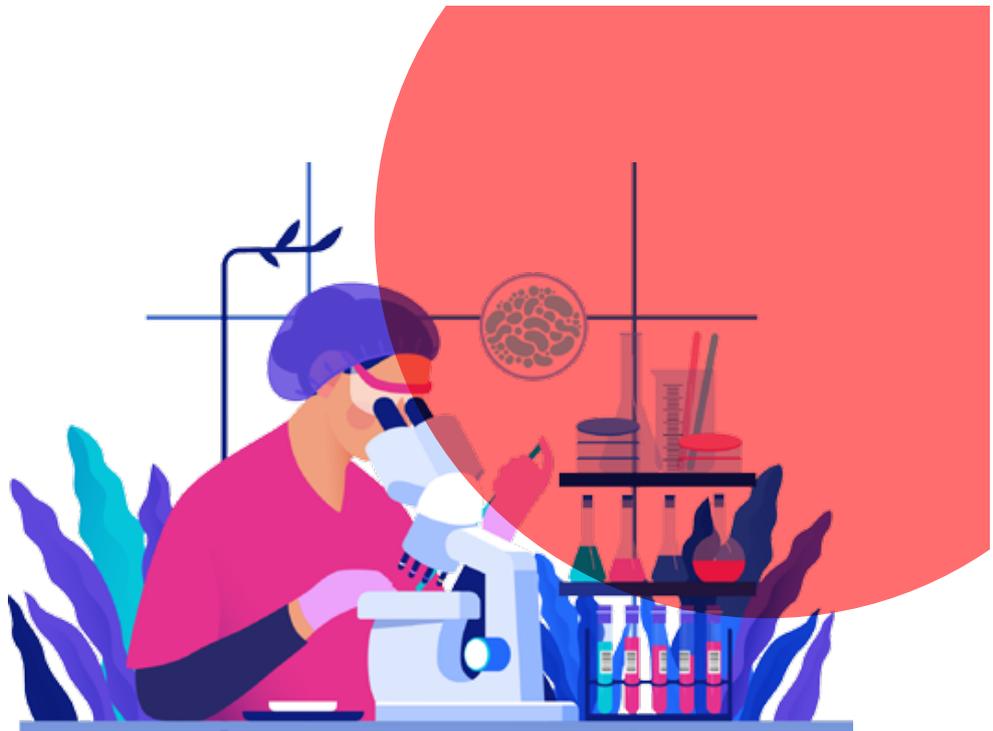
“This was the time I realised there is a huge void in science communication in Malaysia. I decided to pursue a PhD in science communication, being the first to do so in Malaysia.”

“As a science communicator, I engage with so many stakeholders—members of the public, policymakers, scientists, farmers, the media, regulators, industry players, students, teachers and politicians. This makes my job exciting, although it is challenging to customise my work for the diverse stakeholders. Every day is a new day with new topics and audiences. This keeps me going,” she says.

Arujanan, who has trained international scientists, regulators, policymakers, industry players and students in biotechnology in science communication, is passionate about creating science literacy among the public for them to make informed decisions about their diet, health, environment, and even creative career options.

“We need investors to understand science so there is funding to get innovation into the market,” she adds.

She has achieved many “firsts” in the field of biotechnology and contributed to create new approaches to bridge the gap between science and society. Some of these ventures include founding the first science newspaper in Malaysia, *The Petri Dish* that links science and the key decision makers, being the



co-founder of Science Media Centre to provide accurate and factual science information to the media, and establishing the first Asian Short Course on Agribiotechnology, Biosafety and Communication (ASCA) where Asian regulators, scientists, policymakers, postgraduate students, industry players and the media are empowered to make science-based decisions on agribiotechnology.

Arujanan is also internationally known. She was listed as one of the 100 most influential people in the field of biotechnology in the 7th edition of the Scientific American Worldview.

“Maybe I am known for being bold and outspoken. I feel it is not about being popular but doing the right thing for the nation to move forward. The recognition is probably for that trait and creating an impact, and it has opened many more doors for me where I was invited by both local and international agencies as an expert, trainer or consultant,” she says.

Arujanan now sits on the Selangor State Bio Council, which gives the direction for the development of bioindustry in the state. Internationally, she sits on three boards of international organisations—Farming Future Bangladesh, Genetic Literacy Project (USA), and Alliance for Science (USA).

Even with all these accolades, Arujaan does not think of herself as successful and accomplished.

“I feel, so far, I have only managed to create small sparks. I wish to see more support in the field of science from the government and private sectors, and that we can be a competitive nation where we are a champion in science, technology and innovation. I wish to see our education and healthcare revamped and see our youth internationally competent. I want food security, environmental sustainability, and women empowerment.

“I am doing my small part. Real success is still far away,” she says modestly.

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She reckons there is still so much to be done in Malaysia to have more women at the top of the ladder. Societies only prosper in all aspects if women play their roles or are allowed to play their roles. This boils down to women having freedom of choice in education, marriage, career and building a family.

"I always believe a woman who has a good education or worldly exposure and is connected to current affairs is able to manage and bring up her children better. She is able to be a role model and guide to her children.

"I see this in my daughters today. All the education they had at home when young is implanted in them and guides them in life. They have grown up to be career women with big dreams," she says.

Science communication is still not practised in depth in Malaysia, she says. More needs to be done to influence policies and regulations and to bring in investments for research, development and commercialisation.

"I see more young graduates wanting to be science communicators after listening to what I do as a career. Many women have told me how they are now inspired to build their career. That inspires me to do more and to support women empowerment," she says.

FROM SELF DEBASEMENT TO SELF ACTUALISATION

From a low self-esteem child who grew up with a facial deformity and has undergone multiple surgeries to a published author and social activist, Nora Abu

Hassan has come a long way.

Nora was born with a complete unilateral cleft lip and palate and was a victim of school bullies and an outcast due to her facial deformity, which also caused her to have a hyper-nasal tone when she spoke.

She had no less than 10 surgeries in a span of 30 years, having undergone the first surgery at just three months and the last reconstructive procedure when she was 30.

It has been a long process since she came to accept herself through all the struggles she went through. Not only is she living a victorious life, Nora also bravely shared the story of her life in a memoir published in 2019, entitled: *Born To Smile: Life, Love, and Accepting My Cleft Lip and Palate*.

She writes candidly about her birth defect, and the many trials and tribulations during her journey towards self-empowerment. She battled her physical adversity with spiritual courage and went on to achieve important life goals: graduating from university, a career in banking, running a successful business, and becoming a wife, mother and grandmother of three.

"*Born To Smile* is my story of personal courage, transformation, and self-acceptance in the face of a world that challenged me to find my smile in the midst of pain," says the youthful looking 58-year-old.

She also shares that a motivation for writing the memoir is to raise awareness and educate people about cleft lip and palate. One in 700 babies are born with the birth defect and Nora wants



Nora Abu Hassan,
Social Activist,
Speaker & Author

"If you live authentically and be true to who you are, you're living a successful life."

to tell the world one can still live a transformed life and it's nothing to be ashamed of.

"Many people do not know that the transformation to correct cleft lip and palate is a tedious, gradual one. Besides the many surgeries, I also had to go for speech therapy for one and a half years to learn to speak and pronounce properly," she says.

Looking different with her deformed features on her face, Nora recalled her traumatic childhood and teenage years.

"Going to school looking different was difficult because your peers would start calling

you names, which could be very derogatory and hurtful,” she says. “With all the bullying and negative perceptions from others, you won’t have any self-esteem or self-image. I couldn’t accept myself and I thought I was very ugly and unworthy, and I also felt very angry.”

Although she was born in a well-to-do family and her parents had always loved and supported her, Nora had to deal with her inner wounds and repressed negative emotions that she kept all to herself for a long time.

“Even after I looked ‘normal’ following these surgeries, I was still struggling with my inner demons as I could not accept my own birth defect and my past,” she says.

Nora went through a journey to search for ways of self-healing. From therapist consultation to self-help seminars and gurus, she tried many ways to heal her inner scarred soul.

“I met a motivation guru in

2017 and realised what I was born with was absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, and I managed to go through the journey of self-acceptance and self-healing. Finally, I overcame my inner demons and desired to share my story.

“I have gone through the journey of self-renewed discovery, and have no problem at all facing my past,” she says and even candidly points to the surgery line that can still be seen on her reconstructed face.

Nora believes her book carries a strong message that will make people realise self-acceptance is important to go forward in life.

“Maybe my book may give a mother with a cleft lip baby the hope and faith to go on, and if a cleft lip child picks up the book and learns that he or she can be happy, knowing that it’s okay and accept themselves, then it’s already worth it,” says Nora, adding that she also wants to give advice to people

looking for a solution, the right medical help, and other forms of healing.

Since her memoir was published, she has been appearing in the media and talk shows over social media. She also spoke to schools about anti-bullying. The Ronald McDonald House of Charity appointed her to be programme partner in a charity drive that provides financial help to Malaysian children born with cleft lips and palate.

‘Smile with Nora’, a monthly programme on Facebook—sees her inviting people from the community of cleft lips and palate from surgeons and doctors to parents and children—to speak and share their experiences with the deformity.

“Unlike many other medical issues, I have hardly heard of people talking about cleft lip and palate. Because of the lack of awareness, children are still getting discrimination and bullying right now, and I want to change that,” she says.

To Nora, being successful comes from being authentic, living a life that is fulfilling and doing what we truly believe in.

“Many live a life by the definition of others. To me, if you live authentically and be true to who you are, you’re living a successful life,” she says. When asked about her passion, Nora says she aspires to see humanity being kind to one another.

“As cliché as it may sound, my biggest wish is to see a kinder society and kinder world where there is a bigger voice in unity for mankind.”

