

Cracking the glass ceiling

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NUS young women leaders hear it from the best

(SINGAPORE) Sixteen years ago, Fang Ai Lian's husband passed away. Her two children were then five and twelve. Like every mother, she wanted to give them the best in life, so she immersed herself in work - providing for them while distracting herself from her loss.

Mrs Fang shared her story at the Young Women's Leadership Connection with 60 young women leaders from the National University of Singapore (NUS) on Tuesday night, on how women can cope with family pressures and succeed on a still uneven field at work.

'Nothing is more important than your family,' she said. 'Remember: they are your most important stakeholders.'

Mrs Fang is the chairman of Great Eastern Holdings and a director on the boards of several mainboard-listed firms. Prior to this, she was with Ernst & Young for 34 years, where she was appointed managing partner in 1996 and chairman in 2002.

But her climb up the ladder was not effortless, as she recounted her loss of her husband and her journey as a mother.

It is still not a level playing field, the audience heard, as top jobs are still largely a male preserve.

Grace Fu, Senior Minister of State for Education and National Development, also shared her experiences at the forum. She spoke about her days at PSA, when she was promoted from a finance job at the group to the chief executive's post at PSA International. 'Here you are and, out of nowhere, the financial controller is suddenly becoming your CEO,' said Ms Fu. 'It took a while for them to get used to me.'

The need for adjustment is especially stark in the public sector, which is 'highly hierarchical' because of its structured operational procedures. Male colleagues have difficulties coming to terms with a woman sitting above them at work.

However, Ms Fu urged the young women leaders not to try 'to be one of them (males). In fact, I find that if you keep your lady's charm, say things in a way that you're comfortable with,

convince them about how you look at things, I think you'll be able to get their respect much faster. This stereotype of women bosses being very nasty . . . is really a bad stereotype.'

'You don't have to be a man to be successful in a man's world,' she added.

She pointed to the need to constantly sharpen your skills and never get too comfortable in one job because technology is brutal and will make your skills obsolete.

Also, have the right attitude. 'Go out with the right attitude and a lot of your errors will be forgiven,' said Ms Fu.

Recession cycles are getting shorter, but opportunities remain, said Ms Fu. 'Although there are dark clouds ahead of us for the next two years, we know that they will blow over. We know that the sun will come out again.'

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