KUALA LUMPUR, March 7 — There are certain jobs that society considers “male dominated” while other jobs are said to “belong” only to women. In conjunction with International Women’s Day tomorrow, Malay Mail’s Lavinia Louis and Juliana Menon spoke to both women and men who are breaking this gender barrier and have chosen fields of work based solely on their love for the job. They are doing what they do best, not what society says they should do.

The women

Monisha Chatri, 28, site engineer

“I have been in the mechanical engineering field for the past six years. I was always interested in the mechanisms of engineering as I had a keen interest in developing new technologies and structures. Many people told me this was not an industry a girl should delve into ‘belonged’ to men. It is a daily challenge at work as I need to brave the hot weather, harsh site conditions and people who stereotype me. On my first day of work, some of the guys at the site thought I was a tea lady and actually asked for their ‘teh tarik’. They laughed when I said I was their new colleague. Even some of my male bosses underestimated me and thought I wouldn’t be able to deliver to their expectations. For me, gender discrimination is just another challenge. If a guy can be successful in this field, why can’t I?”

Surahyu Hussein, 45, bus driver

“I used to work in an office near my house but the office relocated to Damansara. It became difficult for me to travel to my work place. My husband works as a security guard at the bus station in Old Klang Road. We needed the extra money to pay bills and feed the family. At first, I refused to accept the offer of being a bus captain as I was afraid of the stereotype, and driving a bus around KL. But, my husband coaxed me to accept the offer. People started to make fun of me. One passenger told me she was surprised a female driver could drive a bus so well around town. There were a few male drivers who bullied me when I first started. They used to say I would leave after a few weeks because I wouldn't be able to tolerate the pressure. It has been six years.”

Dr April Camilla Roslani, 47, colorectal surgeon

“I have been in the industry for almost 10 years. I started my formal surgical training in 1999 and then I chose to sub-specialise in colorectal treatment because of the job satisfaction I get. Colorectal cancer is treatable and most of the patients will recover. While I do, I feel like I have achieved something and have given my patients another chance at life. I was never brought up in a discriminated environment as my parents treated all of us equally. I get indirect discrimination because I am a woman and most surgeons in Malaysia are males.

“When I go for conferences, some of the other surgeons who approach me think I am one of the participants' spouse. I get patient come up to me after treatment, saying they did not expect a female surgeon to know this much. To prevent patients from thinking gain their confidence before the surgery and build that bond with them so that they feel comfortable with me. I am very fortunate the support of my husband and family to push me forward. To me, the mindset of society should be changed and they should think also have the right to be whatever they want as equally as men do.”

Melissa Nathan, 32, pilot
Dr April Camilla Roslani, 47, said she started formal surgical training in 1999 and then chose to sub-specialise in colorectal treatment.

Aliff Basari, 24, says it was always his ambition to become a nurse.

“It was always my ambition to become a nurse. It has been two years since I first started at Gleneagles Hospital and it has been an enjoyable experience. Many say only girls should be nurses but for me, I feel happy to be able to take care of patients. During my time of service here, there were some male patients who used to request for only male nurses to take care of them as they were more comfortable with them. One of my most awkward experiences was when a patient tried to grope me as he thought I shared the same feelings towards him as he did for me. Most people always stereotype male nurses as being ‘soft’. One of the female patients even told me she was surprised to see a lot of ‘real’ male nurses.”

Joseph Jerry, 47, stay-at-home dad

“I left my job as a chargeman in early 2012. My mother-in-law said she could not take care of our two kids any more due to health reasons. I decided to leave my job and be a stay-at-home dad because my wife was earning more than me and it was the logical solution at that time. At first, it was extremely challenging as I had to take care of all the household duties. I used to receive many negative remarks about how I was not manly enough to support the family and instead taking up the role of a woman. One of my distant relatives said I didn’t have a backbone because I was not the family’s breadwinner. But there is nothing I would change about my decision as I am able to spend more time with my family. There are days when I think it better for me to start working again but being a stay-at-home dad is a greater challenge.

Paul Raj, 55, masseuse

“This industry has been my ‘rice bowl’ for the past 18 years and I did not see it coming, although both my parents were in this industry. I started working in the hotel industry, then went on to interior designing. I even opened my own restaurant. It was one of my customers at the restaurant who pointed out there were masseuse courses given by an American company and so with an open mind, I went for the course and I somehow started to be interested in it. When I first started working in this industry, I worked at a centre and to my surprise, I did not get discriminated by females but by males as they prefer the touch of a woman. I now have a variety of clients and it gives me satisfaction to heal someone of their pain as I am more specifically into sports injuries also stroke rehabilitation. As much as this is labelled as a women’s industry, men can be part of it, too.”

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