



Changing LIVES

Saleemah Ismail tells Low Shi Ping about the extraordinary upbringing that laid the groundwork for her advocacy of women's freedom with Unifem

Her earliest childhood memories are filled with violence — not that inflicted on her, but on her neighbours.

The Macpherson estate where Saleemah Ismail grew up in the 1970s and early 1980s was notoriously known for unsavoury characters. Fortunately for Saleemah, her home was a shelter from all the brutality.

Looking back, the 37-year-old current president for Singapore's National Committee for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem), is grateful for the type of environment her parents provided her while growing up.

"Macpherson was a colourful estate," Ismail recalls. "Living in a HDB flat meant all the different blocks were closely set to each other. It also meant the walls were very thin, and we inevitably became an unwilling audience to our neighbours' quarrels.

"I remembered when I witnessed violence from my kitchen window. I saw a man take a cooking pot and hit a woman on her head. It didn't happen only once. I also remember hearing my upstairs neighbours quarrelling

and seeing plates fly past my window. And each time there was a fight, we'd call the police for help."

In spite of being surrounded by violence, Saleemah's parents strove to provide her with a loving home. She acknowledges to growing up in a "privileged home", even though her family was not materially wealthy.

Of a Malay-Indian heritage, Saleemah's father was "kind and wise". He opened up their home to neighbours who needed respite from daily hostility. As a child, Saleemah thought it was great fun, for it meant she always had playmates. "It was only much later that I discovered the real reason," she says.

Her childhood brushes with violence motivated her to volunteer for women's cause as an adult. With tears in her eyes, she says, "My father, who passed away 28 years ago, always said the best legacy to leave behind is to have touched someone's life with kindness and compassion. Those whom you've touched will pass it on. It's a continuous cycle and to me, it's the human spirit at its greatest and strongest. I couldn't help the women when I was growing up, as they were getting beaten up.


But now I can, and I am doing exactly that."

Ismail first encountered Unifem four years ago. She had contacted various organisations to volunteer and Unifem was the first to respond. The non-profit group works towards women's empowerment and gender equality. Its programmes in Southeast Asia aim to assist women by providing access to education, healthcare, economic independence and a life free of violence and abuse.

Putting an end to trafficking

Her first mission was to visit Batam, Indonesia to assist in providing healthcare information to migrant workers. But she realised there was a bigger problem brewing there though — trafficking.

"It was a very serious issue," Saleemah says. "When I talked to the women and children, a lot of them were forced into prostitution. Some of the girls were only 13 or 14 years old." Determined to do something about it, Ismail decided to shift her focus to helping the girls leave the industry. She realised that the sex trade was built on the economic law of supply and demand. Supply would only stop



My father always said the best legacy to leave behind is to have touched someone's life with kindness and compassion.

when there was no demand. After conducting research, Saleemah found that more than 80% of the clients were Singaporean men. She decided to return home to start a campaign to address the issue here.

Unifem provided the supporting framework in appealing to the community to lobby the government for a law to stop child-sex tourism. The campaign was a success, as the government has passed the Right to Life and Protection from Abuse and Exploitation law, which will come into effect early next year. "It was one of the major successes on the demand side. Of course there are other non-governmental organisations that work on the supply side, complementing our efforts," she says.

Taking the helm

Not long after, Saleemah was voted into office as president of Singapore's National Committee for Unifem for a two-year term. Trained in marketing and working at that time as regional marketing manager for the financial magazine *The Asian Banker*, she was pleasantly surprised at the organisation's decision.

As president, Saleemah's responsibilities included crafting the strategy, focus and vision for the organisation. "My vision, or aspiration if you like, for Unifem Singapore is for it to be a facilitator of social change. The social change I want to mobilise is for the community to evolve into one of kindness. If we see something that is not right, we stop and do something about it," she says.

She cites the lack of education as the biggest problem faced by women in Southeast Asia. Many are not aware of their rights — to live a life of dignity and self-respect, to practice safe sex, even with their husbands and to be respected as human beings.

Unifem's economic empowerment programme aims to help women develop business and entrepreneurial skills to tap into local, national and global markets. Governance and leadership programmes seek to give women a voice and visibility by encouraging their leadership in decision-making processes.

A conflict area programme provides services for women violated in war and armed conflict. The Unifem Trust Fund to Support Actions to Eliminate Violence Against Women supports projects in areas such as HIV/AIDS, female infanticide, trafficking, forced prostitution, domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape.

Another tool the organisation uses to elevate the status of women is through the United Global Unifem Singapore Fund, created in association with UOB Asset

Management. According to its website unifemsingapore.org, the fund "aims to achieve long-term capital appreciation by investing globally in companies that not only have excellent investment potential, but also more importantly demonstrated responsibility in its policies towards women".

As much as Unifem tries to do good, it has its fair share of detractors. Retaliation against well-meaning volunteers has been vicious. Saleemah tells the story of a social worker in Cambodia, a country where sex trafficking is particularly rampant.

"She has rescued a lot of girls but has a tough time. Two years ago, her house was burned down. Last year, the pimps raided the shelter that the girls she rescued were housed in. They even had guns with them. This year, when I met her, her 14-year-old daughter was just kidnapped and gang-raped. They couldn't break her spirit so they broke the people around her by abusing and torturing them," she says.

Another instance was someone accusing Unifem Singapore of being an organisation of *tai-tais*. She does not deny it but defends them, vocalising her amusement.

"I've had people question how *tai-tais* can relate to the issues faced by women. My response is that they are all kind and generous women. It doesn't mean that because they drive a big car and live in a big house, they are not compassionate. These people are blessed with wealth and are caring enough to pass it on," she says.

Working together

The perception that women are inferior to men is the root cause of many of the problems women face today. But Saleemah is quick to point out that both men and women can help remedy the situation.

"Men play many roles. As fathers, they can educate their daughters on their rights and how to support themselves. They also need to bring their daughters up to have self-esteem and confidence. As husbands, they have to treat their wives with respect and dignity. There is an inherent need for men to be educated on how to understand and take care of women," she says.

Women though, are not entirely blameless as many are guilty of inflicting violence on maids. Female employers need to learn to manage stress better and not take it out on their maids. The important thing is for families to see the maid as a working parent, says Saleemah.

"More often than not, we do not know the maid beyond her first name. For many of them, they seek work here to earn money to support their children and families. Maids have the same concerns and responsibilities as their employers," she says.

Though Ismail believes in women's rights, she is not an advocate of feminism. "I don't believe women are better than men or vice versa. It's not true that the world will be a better place if women ran it. It's all about having a balanced relationship between men and women. We need to see each other in our complementary roles and have a harmonious relationship," she says. ■

Low Shi Ping now makes it a point to count her blessings