

THEBAGPAGE /Nora Farhain

# SALEEMAH ISMAIL

If you are planning to get a present for Saleemah Ismail, a bag might be a good idea.

The president of the United Nations Fund For Women (Unifem) Singapore owns only two handbags – a straw tote she got in Cambodia and a croc-skin bag from home-grown label Kwanpen that she uses for formal occasions.

"I believe in buying something new only when the old one is torn or broken," says the 40-year-old.

She has more important things to worry about.

As head of Unifem Singapore, she visits countries such as Cambodia and Indonesia to implement relevant programmes. These include imparting business know-how, setting up crisis centres for abused women and organising fund-raising events.

Unifem Singapore, which works to provide women in the region access to education, health and economic independence, marks its 10th anniversary this year.

One recent project Saleemah worked on was to rope in Charles & Keith to carry 700 pieces of the straw tote that she owns.

Woven by women under the Cambodian Community of Women Living with HIV/Aids (CCW), the bags were launched last week and cost \$39.90 each.

All sale proceeds go to Unifem, which funds CCW.

Saleemah, who is single, gave up a high-paying job in

advertising to join Unifem in 2003 as a volunteer. She was named its president in 2006.

She is not paid for the job and says she is living off her savings.

She still lives in the three-room Circuit Road flat she grew up in and traces her passion for championing women's rights to her childhood.

"I often heard screams from women who were beaten up by their husbands and police cars were a common sight in the estate," she recalls.

Her latest mission is to encourage employers to give their domestic workers a day off every week.

"Singapore is a First World country but domestic workers here do not get to enjoy First World benefits such as a weekly day off," she laments.

Not surprisingly, material possessions do not come up when she is asked to name her dream gift.

Instead, she hopes for the continued support of her group of friends. The women have known one another for almost 10 years and meet at least once a month.

She says: "They are my sounding board, my source of strength and their guidance helps me listen to my inner wisdom."

## 7 THINGS IN HER BAG



### 1 Shanghai Tang journal

I use this to pen motivational words for myself, such as what I want to achieve in life and the things that I am grateful for.

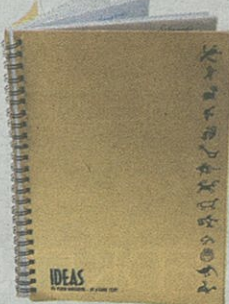
### 2 Braun Buffel key pouch

This pouch contains my office keys, a flash-drive and Internet banking device. I put them all in a pouch to keep them organised.



### 3 A'zone notebook

I use this notebook to jot down ideas in meetings or draw mind maps when planning campaigns.



### 4 Gucci sunglasses

I love huge sunglasses because I am in the sun a lot. I got the pouch in Cambodia. It was made by women from the Cambodian Community of Women Living with HIV/Aids.



### 5 Vodafone mobile phone

I got this free a few years ago when I renewed my mobile phone plan but I never did use it until last year, when my phone broke down.

### 6 iPod

I cannot live without my iPod, especially when I'm commuting. My favourite is chill-out music from the Cafe Del Mar and Buddha Bar series. I also listen to classical music. The pouch was a gift from a close friend who got it in Laos.



### 7 Braun Buffel wallet

I bought a wallet in yellow because it is a cheerful colour and I want to be happy about putting in and taking out money.



### HER BAG

I have been carrying this straw bag for many years. I like its bright orange colour and it is roomy enough for all my things.



ST PHOTOS: ONG WEE JIN