

COVER STORY

Female empowerment

Despite what some people think, females make up a large part of the real estate workforce in Singapore, holding various jobs like valuation, auctioneering and even property development. We speak to two highly respected women about their experiences working in an industry that is sometimes perceived as a man's world.

By Romesh Navaratnarajah



Leny Suparman is the co-founder of KOP Limited, a developer of luxury properties. (Photo: KOP)

Poised, articulate and friendly are just some of the words that come to mind when describing Mary Sai, Executive Director of Investment and Capital Markets at Knight Frank Singapore, one of the leading real estate firms here.

In an industry that is often perceived as male-dominated, she has made a name for herself by leading the Commercial Sales Department, negotiating the sale of investment buildings, land sales and commercial projects.

Sitting down for an interview with PropertyGuru, she quickly dispels the notion that real estate is a man's world. "I never felt that gender was an issue," she said. "In fact, we are seeing many second-generation female leaders in the business, such as developers' children, and also up-and-coming executives. Some of the chief valuers and brokers are also women."

She added that there is a large number of good female quantity surveyors in the construction industry,

and the same can be said about the architecture practice. She points to Wo Mei Lan, co-founder of Liu & Wo Architects, as a trailblazer in architectural conservation.

Some other influential names that come up during our interview include Ong Chih Ching and Leny Suparman, the co-founders of luxury developer KOP Limited; Kemmy Tan, CEO at Malaysia-Singapore joint venture firm, M+S, which developed the DUO and Marina One projects; and the Housing and Development Board's (HDB) CEO, Dr Cheong Koon Hean, who helped transform Singapore's public housing programme.

No obstacles

"When I was in real estate training, 40 of the 50 students were female, so it wasn't intimidating for us," said Sai. "We can be valuers, quantity surveyors and marketing agents. We have a fair chance to decide what we want to do in this industry, but it comes down to personal goals. Some women don't feel like they need to have it all, but if they want it, there are no constraints."

If anything, being a woman in the real estate industry has its advantages. For instance, female brokers are sometimes more persevering, and are able to negotiate for intangibles, noted Sai.

"This means helping both parties to compromise, which requires a certain level of patience and understanding of each other's expectations. If it is a long-drawn-out process, then interpersonal skills are required, and you need to know what areas both sides are willing to be flexible," she said.

Flashback to the 80s

Sai began her career in 1981 as a valuer in a small company. After eight years, she moved to Knight Frank to take on a role in marketing and auctioneering. "I conducted auctions of historic shophouses in Chinatown, state land in Kew Drive, as well as heavy vehicle parks," she said.

In 2009, when the market for strata commercial properties was heating up, she and her team began looking for opportunities in this segment. Today, she also oversees investment deals, which includes collective sales.

Now in her 50s, she counts herself lucky to have been mentored by Knight Frank's former Chairman, the late Cheong Thiam Siew, who was a pioneer in real estate auctions and valuation, and also a contemporary of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister.

Describing him as hardworking, intelligent and a man of principle, she said: "What mattered to him most was integrity, and this character trait was inculcated in me from the time I joined Knight Frank.

"I always remember him telling us that whether the market is up or down, our services are required. It comes

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down to how you gain the confidence of your clients for them to appoint you to handle the marketing on their behalf."

Dealing with difficult people

The job hasn't always been easy, though. One of the biggest challenges she faced came when she was doing mortgage sales. "As the properties were being foreclosed, we encountered owners who were very unhappy because their properties were being taken back by the bank.

"When you go and inspect the property to put it up for sale, some of the owners may become abusive," she shared.

She remembered this one time when the owners brought their dog to the gate to scare them off. "If I was a man, they probably would not have challenged me." But she noted that such cases are few and far between.

A supportive network

Despite the heavy workload, Sai is happy to have the support of her loved ones. "You need help from your family when it comes to domestic affairs, like in bringing up the children while you take care of your career.

"Quality time is very limited. What cannot be done should be outsourced, like enrichment classes and tuition for the children. I went through this myself, like many parents do," she said.

A flair for real estate

KOP's Leny Suparman has always had a passion for real estate, hospitality and lifestyle. "Growing up, my family was in many businesses, including real estate, and that interest has rubbed off on me," said the 43-year-old.

Prior to co-founding KOP in 2006, she headed the retail department at property consultancy CBRE for nine years, where she worked with numerous big-name retail brands in redevelopment projects in Singapore and Shanghai.

She left to become Director of Real Estate in KOP Management Services, where she sourced, executed and closed property transactions on behalf of clients.

As Group CEO and Executive Chairman of KOP, she now helps to oversee a company that is responsible for developing several iconic residential projects in Singapore,

including Hamilton Scotts, which has garnered much attention for its unique sky garages, and Ritz-Carlton Residences – the first one outside of North America. "We (Suparman and business partner Ong Chih Ching) were one of the first women to run a real estate business in the industry," she told PropertyGuru.

The group has also ventured into Indonesia, establishing its Montigo Resorts luxury hospitality brand in Batam Island and Bali. There are plans to expand further into new markets, with its joint venture development in Shanghai, dubbed WintaStar, slated to become the world's largest integrated winter resort.

Financial backing

Suparman acknowledges that their business received strong support from bankers and investors in the early days, who provided them with the necessary financial backing to execute their projects.

"We also have a very strong Board of Directors, each of whom are deeply experienced in their own fields, furnishing us with invaluable advice and opening up doors through their wide network," she said.

Without divulging any names, she revealed that there are several industry leaders whom she looks up to, and heeds their advice from time to time.

Men still dominate

While she has gained the respect of her male peers, Suparman still thinks the real estate industry is dominated by men. "I have noticed that men are more cohesive and tend to bond together, making it difficult for women to join the "brotherhood", which is essential for networking and uncovering business opportunities," she said.

Suparman pointed out that another disadvantage is that property development requires a vast amount of knowledge in construction, which she feels is a man's world.

She added: "The long hours and stress required to see through a project means that this is not a 9-to-5 job, which could be deterrent for many women."

Guts and tenacity

However, she does see this trend changing. "I hope there will be more

women with the guts and tenacity to take the plunge into this industry."

Like Knight Frank's Sai, she holds the same opinion that women bring valuable skills that put them at an advantage over men.

"Female developers tend to be more sensitive to the actual function and practicality of the product because they have the end-user perspective, and typically pay more attention to detail.

"We also work harder and we don't take things for granted, and are more precise in the execution," she noted.

Inequality still exists

Professor Annie Koh from the Singapore Management University (SMU) is an expert on gender inequality in the workforce. She believes that women have to work doubly hard to be recognised by their superiors, given the perception that they have to balance home and work life.

But the advancement of new technology, especially in the real estate industry, means that women can adopt flexible work hours and lead projects without having to be on site all the time. Koh mentioned that with augmented reality and virtual reality becoming more popular, space plans can be viewed on the go.

At the same time, "contracts can now be archived and scanned, and you don't have to carry plans and files to make smart decisions", she said.

With this, Koh feels that physical barriers for women in real estate are gradually being removed, but more can be done. "Building and construction firms must realise that they have to be more pro-family in their people practices," she said.

She singled out companies like Woh Hup and City Developments Limited, which are family-owned, and therefore more likely to encourage the participation of women in decision-making processes.



Property veteran Mary Sai heads the Commercial Sales Department at Knight Frank Singapore.