

Why men should be allies for diversity

BY TAN ZHAI YUN

Chin Yoong Kheong, a former board member at several public-listed companies (PLCs) in Malaysia, was once approached by the chairman of a PLC to join its board. The discussions didn't bear fruit, however, because he was of the "wrong gender".

"Eventually, the chairman came and told me that I beat all the candidates, and the only reason why they didn't select me was because they needed to give it to a woman," says Chin.

This was in the early days of the Securities Commission Malaysia (SC) encouraging PLCs to increase women's representation on boards as a corporate governance priority under the Malaysian Code on Corporate Governance (MCCG) 2012.

Interestingly, Chin was agreeable with the board's decision.

"I always take the view that as a chairman of a nomination committee, if you get a board member who wants to join you because of the remuneration or they just want something to do, you've got the wrong candidate. I did not yearn for any board seats. I took what was suitable. If I had been sitting in his position, I [might have made] the same decision."

In 2022, Bursa Malaysia mandated that PLCs have at least one woman director on their boards. The SC, on its part, encouraged PLCs to have at least 30% of their boards made up of women — covering only large PLCs under MCCG 2017 and all PLCs under MCCG 2021.

While it is not mandatory for PLCs to reach the 30% mark, Chin observes that PLCs have generally

been trying their best to do so. Some do it out of a desire to comply with the regulators' wishes, while others truly see the benefit of having a diversity of opinions.

While the progress has been impressive, challenges remain. According to the SC's data (as at Jan 1, 2026), most PLCs (503) have more than 30% women on their boards while 361 have just one woman director. Six have all-male boards.

Of the total board positions of 7,390, women currently hold 2,164 (29.3%) — 53 short of the targeted 30% of all PLC boards.

To continue pushing the needle, the 30% Club Malaysia, a business-led campaign to facilitate 30% women representation on boards and the C-suite, tried a different strategy last May by launching the "Men Allies for Parity" initiative. The initiative engages male leaders in boardrooms, the C-suite and policymaking roles, and empowers them to advocate for women's representation in leadership, a factor 30% Club Malaysia believes is critical to effect meaningful change.

Chin, who recently retired as a senior independent non-executive director of RHB Investment Bank Bhd, was one of the male allies approached by 30% Club Malaysia.

"The Men Allies for Parity initiative was launched at a meaningful milestone for 30% Club Malaysia — 10 years into the journey. After a decade of building awareness, the conversation has naturally evolved from why diversity matters to how we accelerate



LOW YEN YEING / THE EDGE

"You sit on the board for nine years as an independent director or a maximum of 12 years. You know very clearly when each board member is retiring, so you cannot say that you can't find a candidate in time, unless there is a sudden resignation."

Chin, former director of PLCs

systemic progress," says Nurul A'in Abdul Latif, chair of 30% Club Malaysia and executive chair of PwC Malaysia.

"Engaging male allies is a natural next step because leadership transformation is most powerful when it is shared. Many of today's boardrooms and C-suite are still predominantly led by men. When

those leaders actively champion parity, the conversation shifts from being perceived as a 'women's issue' to being recognised as a governance priority and a board effectiveness imperative."

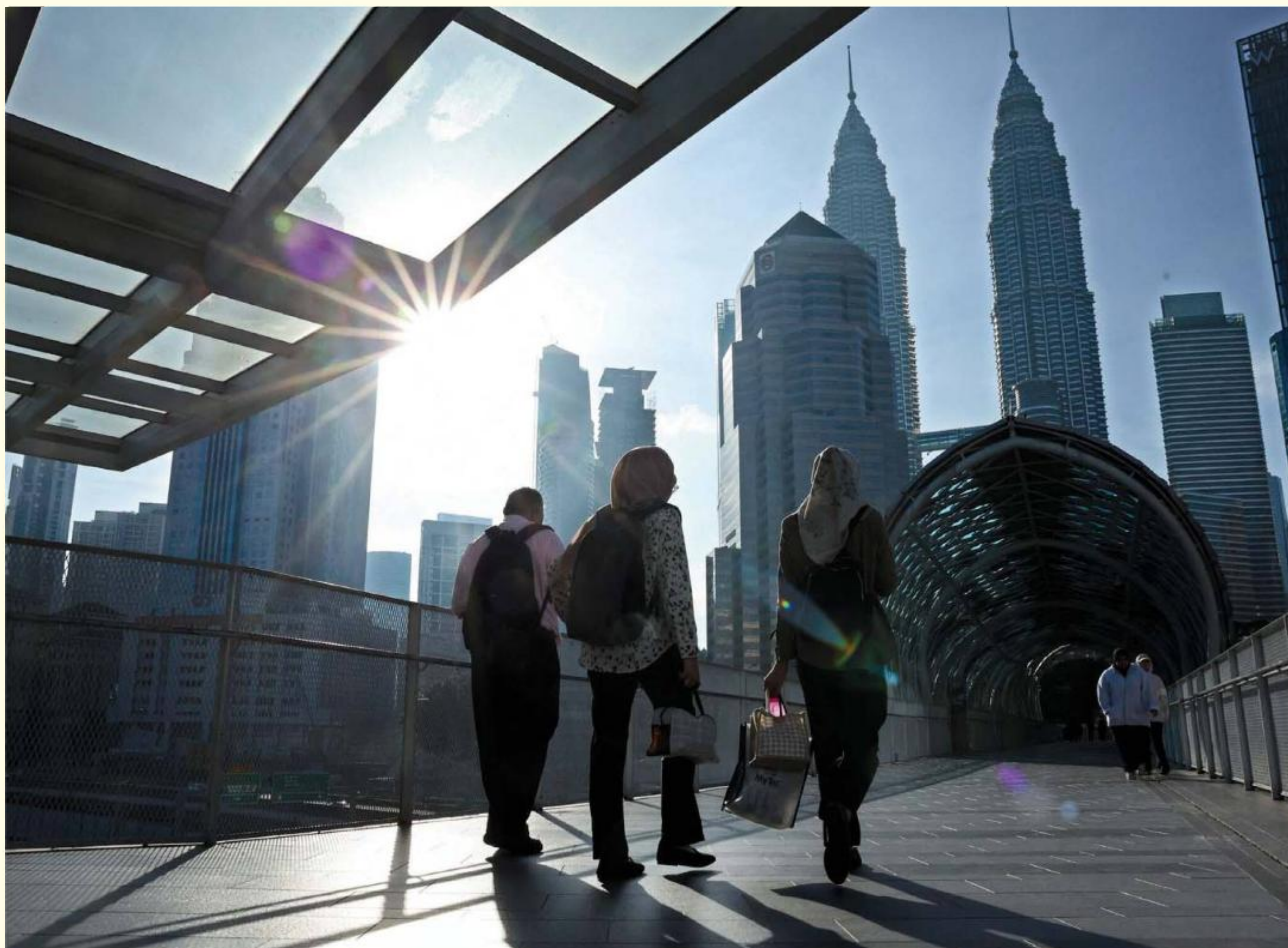
Male allies are not called to "fix" anything, she points out. Instead, they are invited to help shape the next generation of high-performing boards.

They take on formal and informal roles, and could play a part in strengthening the search practices for qualified women to be on boards. They also encourage nomination committees to define roles by capabilities needed to address future challenges, rather than relying solely on traditional titles.

Additionally, they could actively sponsor high-potential women candidates and ensure they are explicitly considered in succession

discussions so that boards look beyond familiar circles and secure the best talent available, says Nurul A'in.

"It's not going to be a formal programme with terms of reference. We want not just women, but men talking to other men about diversity ... Many men say this is not a gender issue, but it contributes



The SC has long encouraged PLCs to increase women's representation on boards as a corporate governance priority

to better governance and better decision-making, and you have more choice of talent. This is where we need male allies," she adds.

This point is echoed by Tan Sri R Palan, pro-chancellor of the University of Cyberjaya and a male ally for this initiative. He is the founder of SMRT Holdings Bhd and Cyberjaya Education Group Bhd, and sits on the board of the two companies.

"One of the biggest challenges is, when everyone is alike, we tend to agree rather than challenge one another. With conformity, you don't get any innovation or problem-solving. I'm always fond of the quote that says, 'If you do the same thing again and again, and expect different results, you are insane,'" says Palan.

He adds that men must support this movement and address challenges that result in low women representation in senior positions and inequitable pay compared with men in the same roles.

"There is a famous saying in Tamil that my mother used to always say to me: 'If you want to cut a diamond, you better use a diamond to [do so]'. What better way to influence than using men? It is not about intent; it is always about assumptions and taking things for granted."

The Men Allies for Parity initiative is based on invite-only nominations. Currently, there are 10 male allies in the initiative.

BE OPEN WHEN LOOKING FOR TALENT

Boards often complain that they struggle to find sufficient and suitable female talent to become directors. Critics say, however, that the search process and outreach are often too narrow.

There are also important structural challenges being addressed in part by organisations such as the Institute of Corporate Directors Malaysia, which have programmes targeting women.

Nurul A'in highlights statistics that show more than half of Malaysia's university graduates are women.

"We need male allies to dispel that notion [that it is difficult to find female candidates] ... More than 50% of our graduates and working class are female, so you can't have a bigger proportion and not have talent."

The Department of Statistics Malaysia's data from 2024 showed that 51.9% of graduates are female. However, women's labour force participation rate is 83.4% compared with 89% for men. In addition, the mean monthly salary of women is lower than men's.

In addition, male STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) graduates had a higher hiring rate despite women making up 53.2% of STEM graduates in 2021, according to a 2023 study by Khazanah Research Institute.

These structural challenges can be addressed by widening the search pool for talent, sponsorship of women to board positions or introducing work arrangements that address their needs.

Megat Zariman Abdul Rahim, president and executive director of Velesto Energy Bhd, a service provider for the oil and gas upstream sector, says the company actively monitors for diversity and ensures it has sufficient women representation, including women engineers.

According to its 2024 sustainability report, Velesto Energy has



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30% Club Malaysia**

33% women on its board, 35% in management and 59% at the executive level.

"Why would you exclude half of the population from your talent pool? When you have diversity, you get different perspectives and issues on the table, and that really helps the organisation move forward," says Megat Zariman.

"Including women in the workforce is a great thing, and you'll see benefits from having a diversity of ideas and thought processes. I've seen it in over 30 years of working around the world in different companies."

Velesto Energy strives to provide equal opportunities to men and women, regardless of the role, he adds. According to the sustainability report, Velesto's Gender Equality Policy provides equal opportunities to male and female employees, and encourages women to pursue roles, including in traditionally male-dominated technical, offshore and field-re-

lated areas.

"Typically, people think that women would like to do jobs like finance and not engineering. But in Velesto, we have operation engineers who are ladies, and they really enjoy it ... This is an example of why there shouldn't be any bias towards whether it's a job for males or females," says Megat Zariman.

The search for women directors should also be widened beyond the "men's club" and planned ahead.

For example, Chin says he was scouted to be a board member almost a year before he retired from KPMG. The same can be applied to a search for female talent.

"If we set the direction that we want to achieve, the 30% goal, then you've got to start early. I don't understand why some nomination committees [cannot find a woman director.] It should be planned at least three years in advance. I don't believe that there are no suitable candidates.

"You know the target. You know who is retiring ... You sit on the board for nine years as an independent director or a maximum of 12 years. You know very clearly when each board member is retiring, so you cannot say that you can't find a candidate in time, unless there is a sudden resignation."

The flip side of this problem is that PLCs, in a rush to meet the 30% target, end up filling the position with women candidates who may not be suitable for the role, he observes. For instance, at an investment bank, someone with a more technical background would be a better fit, Chin explains, while a director with a more balanced approach may be suitable for a family-owned company.

He hopes that the 30% Club Malaysia can help address this gap, and wants to contribute by sharing his experience.

SPONSORSHIP VERSUS MENTORSHIP

To widen the talent pool and ensure that women candidates are supported, men allies can go beyond "mentoring" to "sponsoring" these talents. Borrowing this idea from former chief operating officer of Meta Platforms and Leanin.org founder Sheryl Sandberg, Palan explains the difference between the two terms.

"Mentoring is showing that you're willing to support the person and give ideas. But sponsorship means you are willing to take

responsibility and vouch for someone's credibility. There haven't been enough women getting this kind of sponsorship.

"A lot of decisions are made before board appointments in informal networks. Sponsorship opens doors. Networks are very important and so is privilege. You get privilege through networks. You'll find that men get a bigger share of sponsorship."

Palan says he has always strived to achieve diversity on his boards, not just in terms of gender but also age, race and geography. SMRT's board is currently 37.5% women, according to the latest sustainability report, while Cyberjaya Education has 43% women on its board.

He adds that it wasn't difficult to find talent and those citing it as a hurdle may have to reflect on whether they may be biased.

Palan also believes the way people assess female and male talent, based on merit, is unequal. "You expect a woman to arrive with fully proven credentials, but you're willing to give men a chance because you base it on potential."

Both Palan and Megat Zariman say they monitor the gender diversity of their boards and management to ensure there is sufficient diversity. Sometimes, this might mean taking more time to find the right candidate, Palan adds.

"I was listening to [a speech by] Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang, who said that good governance sometimes means slowing down decisions to improve the quality. Just wait for the right candidate a month longer. Good governance ensures the process is supreme."



SAM FONG/THE EDGE

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Megat Zariman, Velesto Energy

MORE FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

One reason many women drop out of the workforce is due to parenting responsibilities. For the "sandwich generation", there is the added burden of also caring for ageing parents.

This was a challenge faced by some of the interviewees, who say that flexible work arrangements were helpful in such situations, although not all companies have the resources to introduce these benefits.

Megat Zariman highlights that Velesto has flexible work arrangements as well.

"We just need to monitor so we can allow our talents to develop without feeling constrained," he says. According to its sustainability report, as of 2024, new mothers receive 98 days' leave while fathers are granted seven days, in line with regulatory standards.

However, things may change as the younger generation have less traditional views about gender roles, both at home and elsewhere. Chin quips that the younger generation are also more empowered to speak their minds, providing another diverse perspective.

"I call myself part of the 'sandwich generation'. But my children are from a different generation. To them, it's not about money. It's about the quality of life. That's a different mindset and another point of diversity," he says.

Both Megat Zariman and Palan encourage nurturing the younger generation of women to address these challenges and be prepared for board positions.

"It's not so much about mandating [30% representation] because anything that you force, you will always find resistance. There must be more education. I think what we're doing now is correct, and ICDM has a pool of candidates in various areas," says Palan.

"We've got to prepare younger women today for board responsibilities. It is not easy and comes with a lot of responsibilities ... It's very important that we get the right women on boards. We educate, prepare and sponsor." **E**



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