The CAPTAIN is a LADY
"I’m an engineer at heart, so it’s a pleasure to be involved, and serving the industry was always something I felt I had to do," says Sharifah Zaida Nurlisha Syed Ibrahim, the first woman president of the Malaysian Oil & Gas Services Council.

Her election to lead the industry’s most influential grouping in Malaysia has come just as the industry is reeling from plummeting oil prices which have rattled the entire plans of entire oil-producing nations for the next decade. A lady, at this high tension time?

Sharifah Zaida has served on the MOGSC exco for six years and is a two-term vice president. “It began with industry friends persuading me to take a role," she says. “In the beginning, I was apprehensive. I knew that women have served on the exco before but wondered if the industry accept a woman president, and would they accept me?’

As it turned out, Malaysia’s oil and gas players were hardly concerned about gender or appearances. Instead, they confidently placed their trust in Sharifah Zaida’s leadership – and her cheerful, positive disposition -- to navigate the industry through the most difficult period in the history of oil and gas.

“You know, like most people, there’s always this tiny thought at the back of my mind wondering if I can do this,” says Sharifah Zaida, general manager, project management at MMC Oil & Gas Engineering Sdn Bhd. “But that helps me to be more alert. At 51 and with 26 years in oil and gas, I’m also acutely aware that now is the right time for me to share my experience and be involved in how the industry moves forward. This is the best place for me to give back to the industry. More importantly, I am supported by a strong, dedicated and committed exco.”

Two weeks after her election, Sharifah Zaida led a one-day teambuilding session in Kuala Lumpur. The 10-member exco brainstormed to refresh MOGSC’s objectives by revisiting its core values and its history. The MOGSC is a neutral platform for stakeholders and members to discuss industry issues. Competitors and stakeholders sit at the same table to resolve industry issues through MOGSC’s working groups. In the wrong hands, it can go out of control given that the oil and gas business is a big business and important to the country.

From the brainstorming, the 2016-2018 exco developed 10 objectives. “Our primary focus is to help members ride the storm. We want to see members remain in this industry once the storm is over.”

Other objectives include initiatives through Coral 2.0. MOGSC has been appointed to be the industry focal point for this PETRONAS initiative and has collaborated closely with the CORAL 2.0 team for over a year looking at cost and process optimisation initiatives.

With the MOGSC exco and Datuk Wan Zulkiflee Wan Ariffin, President and CEO of PETRONAS.
MOGSC will also work closely with other associations. In difficult times, it makes good sense to identify, capitalise and collaborate on each association’s strength. “Industry as a whole needs to enable growth and survival. Everything we do is to benefit all sides. Certainly, this is not a time for MOGSC to compete with other NGOs or industry representatives.”

Another primary goal, she says, is to make MOGSC relevant. The committee worked hard on fresh protocols and terms of reference for MOGSC working groups and initiatives which are traditionally, and successfully, driven by members. Working groups have been consolidated and streamlined to reflect current needs and ensure they function in the spirit of MOGSC neutrality.

“The big challenge at the moment is the economy,” says Sharifah Zaida. “It’s about jobs. People are being laid off. Companies may be closing down or deciding to close down. We will lose our talents and lose them to other industries. The best thing MOGSC can do is stay close to stakeholders and disseminate realistic information. Unsubstantiated information can lead to wrong decisions by our member companies. I cannot stress enough how important this realistic information is and how hard MOGSC works with industry stakeholders to obtain information for members.”

MOGSC was formed during the original CORAL in the late 1990s as an initiative to have an association driven and promoted by the services sector in the oil and gas industry. As such, MOGSC has had tremendous support from PETRONAS over the years and is close to PETRONAS management.

“It’s best to share info, even if it’s bad news, so that industry managers make good decisions, the right decisions and not work by speculation. The industry expects some companies to close down, and for others to stomach the storm. There may be fewer players. Perhaps members can consolidate or merge, others may restrategise. This transparency has helped companies make good decisions.”
The MOGSC leadership wants Malaysian companies to survive the storm, sustain themselves and carry on with their talent intact and be on the ready for the next wave.

“Over the last five years, there has been significantly more dialogue between PETRONAS, government agencies and the industry. So much so, even membership has increased. Accelerated engagement means all the stakeholders are on the same page.

Since taking office, Sharifah Zaida has led sessions with top PETRONAS management, their downstream team and various events for MOGSC members to meet key people. PETRONAS’ ongoing reorganisation and cost-cutting are of great interest to MOGSC members who need to know the strength of those huge exercises and understand their net effect on the industry. Many companies face the same issues and have proceeded with best ways to reorganise themselves.

For Sharifah Zaida, restrategising has meant looking for business in new places. “In the past, my portfolio was about oil and gas. Now we are looking at other possibilities like water, and doing project management for our sister companies.”

MMC Oil & Gas Engineering, a part of MMC Bhd, has nearly 500 people based in KL, Miri, Bintulu and Kerteh. With management support, Sharifah Zaida’s team is bidding for projects that MMC sister companies would normally tender out.

“The experience is different when working with sister companies, it’s like working with siblings. The principles are the same but environment is different. Now we compete for those jobs. There’s no presumption that we are the natural choice.

“This has led to insights into how good we are. Today’s prices have changed everything. Companies used to bid for projects based on the idea that oil was USD120 a barrel. Today, we are at below half of that. The whole business structure has changed. That’s the challenge.”

For a woman, the challenges don’t stop there.

Sharifah Zaida’s family is from Perak but she grew up in Ulu Tiram, Johor, where her father was a palm oil mill manager. She and her four siblings were brought up in a conservative home and commuted daily to schools in Johor Baru. She attended Convent JB and SIGS before transferring to Johor Baru’s Sekolah Tun Fatimah boarding school where she fell in love with learning, dance, French, netball and running – good enough to represent the district at state-level events. She became a prefect and a goal-oriented teenager.

When she was six, she would play with ice and pretend it was snow, and found it fascinating that airplanes had TVs in them. “My mother kept saying that if I studied hard, I could get on a plane and see real snow. That was motivation for me. Soon enough, I was in Swansea doing my A’ levels. It was my very first unchaperoned trip anywhere.”

She enrolled for electrical engineering at Nottingham University. There were six women in class of 80. “It was overwhelming and I pushed myself to ask questions in public. It taught me self confidence.” She continued with MBA, clocking in seven years in the UK.
When she returned in 1990, she signed up as a management trainee at Sime Darby and was channelled to Sime Engineering as an instrument engineer. At the time, working in oil and gas seemed like a distant idea but quickly she began to enjoy looking into flows, temperatures and pressures of platforms and working with mechanical, pipeline and safety engineers. At a career review, she chose to stay in engineering and gave up a chance to move to corporate finance in Sime Darby.

Five years later, she moved to MMC and was assigned as a project engineer. “And I discovered that I love management. I moved from a very technical role to management so naturally, I felt I had a natural affinity and that I was growing.”

Meanwhile, her family was growing. She had met her husband Ruslan Abdullah, a plant scientist and an oil palm expert, at Nottingham University where he was doing a PhD. They have five children aged 25 to 16. They chose to live in Seremban’s Bukit Chedang neighbourhood. Sharifah Zaida still commutes to the capital daily and does her best to get back in time to cook a meal.

Her most challenging assignment was a 480km pipeline job in Sudan. “That was tough with many sleepless nights to stay on schedule. The culture and environment in Sudan is different, I would say there’s a high level of difficulty. The Sudanese are a proud people with a long history but the country was many years behind the rest of the world in terms of development. By the time we finished our project, we could already see so much growth.”

She was based in Kuala Lumpur but found herself “commuting” to Sudan every month, sometimes staying on for several weeks. At home, her husband was managing their home and children, sometimes without help. “When the two year job was over, I observed that my kids had grown up and they had changed. My key take-away from this experience is that, the success of a person depends so much on having a supportive spouse especially when it comes to a woman.”

Sharifah Zaida is also thankful for the tremendous support she receives from her parents, the extended family and her immediate boss, her CEO. She has other sources of inspiration: her friends. They have funny group names like Ninja, SK82, FISCIVE and Lunchies. Some of the friendships go back to childhood. “I belong to a group of awesome entrepreneurial women called Vogue Mommies Club (VMC) founded by Puan Sri Nisa Bakri. Friends are important. I believe in that famous line, Girls compete with each other, women empower each other.”

With colleague and children in Sudan.

At the MMCOG booth during Malaysian Reserve interview in OGA 2015.

On holiday in Lake District, UK with the family.