

Never Give-up Your Core Values and Principles #Women's Day 2020

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In conversation with sportive and empathetic Dr Mary Kan, Programme Director, Singapore Biodesign to applaud her inspiring journey through her Healthcare domain

International Women's Day 2020 embracing the world with its new campaign **#EachForEqual**, aiming to draw attention to the difference each woman can bring out. Gender equality is essential for economies and communities to thrive. The campaign is expected to bring about change by raising awareness of bias and calling out inequality and to cheer women's achievement. Asian Women have always pioneered in the healthcare sector with venturesome women heading the most influential positions in the different domains of health and medicine. Biospectrum Asia has always been mesmerized by our courageous women leaders in the healthcare industry and is celebrating this women's day with one such spectacular achiever **Dr Mary Kan, Programme Director, Singapore Biodesign, Singapore**.

Dr Mary is the Program Director of Singapore Biodesign (SB), an Asian-centric health tech innovation talent development platform. To date, she has conducted Biodesign training for more than 200 people and advised over 10 MedTech project teams who have gone on to secure follow-on funding. She is no stranger to nonconventional initiatives such as pioneering

women's water polo in a male-dominated sport, creating a new healthcare business strategy for a multi-billion dollar engineering firm, and helming the transition of the Singapore-Stanford Biodesign Programme to SB. Since she joined SB, Mary has established the programme through its enhanced offerings such as the revamped innovation fellowship which introduced a China immersion component since 2018, piloting the first-in-market incubator collaboration in 2019 with Fogarty Institute for Innovation to advance local startups, and a new faculty fellowship in 2020 to empower local PIs to introduce Biodesign into their innovation projects. Mary stands out for her passion, and motherly instincts to relate and nurture.

Dr Mary who has always been a multi-dimensional, empathetic, inspiring role model says, "I encourage all women to show your competitive side and expertise in your domain. Don't ever feel intimidated! A woman's natural disposition towards caregiving places us at an advantage to better implement healthcare initiatives with an added touch of thoughtfulness! There's still plenty to contribute and make an impact!"

On this special occasion of Women's Day, **Dr Mary Kan** gracefully shared her views and journey with Biopsectrum Asia to inspire millions of women in healthcare.

What is your opinion on the lower percentage of women leaders in the Life sciences industry?

Women looking to transition into leadership roles may face potential challenges. Those who plan to have children will have to balance child-bearing/minding during periods of their careers that are typically important to their professional growth. It is important for them to seek work environments that are understanding of their family responsibilities, offer sufficient development and leadership opportunities, and are supportive of women progressing in leadership tracks.

Are the industries designating women to certain presumed gender-based positions in the companies?

Instead of designating women to presumed gender-based positions, companies should strive for gender equality and balance in all of their roles across the employment hierarchy as part of their work ethos to benefit from the insights and qualities of both genders.

For the healthcare/Medtech industry, the presence of women in leadership positions could have many benefits as women are usually the 'matriarchs' who provide the much-needed care and support to boost the wellness of the organisation. They also bring different perspectives from their male counterparts in identifying healthcare opportunities and requirements, drawing on their own experiences with their families.

Share your experience as an achiever in the Life Science industry and how you excelled to reach your goals.

I had the fortune of benefitting from prior experiences in a different industry, where I pioneered the formation of the **Singapore Women's Water Polo Team** that won its inaugural SEA Games Gold medal in 2009. In a traditionally male-dominated sport, this was only made possible with a group of like-minded teammates and the support of believers of our mission who moved levers to resource our development.

More recently, I've led the transition of the Singapore-Stanford Biodesign programme to what is now known as Singapore Biodesign. It is a capability development initiative that aims to train and nurture the next generation of health technologies innovators for Singapore and Asia. To date, almost half of our Biodesign innovation fellows are women, mirroring our programme partners from Stanford who are committed to gender equality for health tech. Being part of the programme has opened many doors for me. The exposure through the fellowship brought about mentorship and a network of like-minded men and women who have been there, done it, and who continue to act as a sounding board for me to derive my motivation and inspiration to press on.

In addition to the above, leaning on the characteristics of being a woman such as developing high empathy towards people in the organisation, having the grit of a working mum to see things through, and having the emotional support of a loving family are some of the ingredients that contributed to the small successes that I have had along the way.

What would be your suggestion to encourage women towards leadership roles and how a prolonged change can be achieved?

A concerted top-down and bottom-up approach to encouraging women towards leadership roles would be needed to achieve a prolonged change. I would like to encourage all women who are on their way to leadership tracks to double-down and dig deep when the going gets tough, but never to give up on their core values and principles. Importantly, to find superiors and organisations which empower you and tangibly recognise you for what you deserve. When the time comes for you to pay it forward, to do so by encouraging female representation within the workplace and doing likewise to women under your charge.