

# PUSHING BOUNDARIES, BREAKING BARRIERS

The construction industry is a male domain but three young women are breaking the stereotype.

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WOMEN are not a common sight at construction sites. They are a minority when it comes to jobs that are dangerous, difficult and dirty.

Such trades are more common for men but at MMC Gamuda, there is a group of women who thrive on getting down and filthy to succeed.

These young women have excelled in their respective areas while playing a significant role in building Malaysia's first Mass Rapid Transit project (KVMRT Sungai Buloh-Kajang line or Line 1), which will be completed at the end of next month.

Line 1 comprises both elevated and underground portions; the latter involves tunnelling more than 40m down into the heart of Kuala Lumpur's busy city centre.

Meanwhile, Line 2 (also known as the Sungai Buloh-Serdang-Putrajaya line) is scheduled for completion in 2022 to serve as critical urban rail lines in the Klang Valley.

The first phase of the largest infrastructure in the country required various expertise including architects, planners, design engineers, safety managers, traffic managers, tunnellers and station construction engineers.

While it is a male dominated

field, three women have proven that they, too, can excel in the industry.

## Meteoric rise

Noor Affida Raffika Mohamad Nazari is one such talented lass, who rose within five years to become section head of an underground station at MMC Gamuda.

She was deployed at Maluri station during the construction of MRT Line 1 for four years, and has been section head of KLCC East MRT Underground since mid-2016.

"As a child, I didn't like playing with dolls or masak-masak; my preference was for buildings and Lego sets. My parents were very supportive. I am also a bit persistent, and not at all girly," shares Noor Affida, 29, a Gamuda scholar.

Instead of watching cartoons, the girl from Penang would be glued to documentaries on the National Geographic channel. By the time she was 10, she knew she wanted to become an engineer in the construction industry.

Her single-minded devotion to this ambition led to her obtaining a scholarship to study at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia in Batu Pahat, Johor. She even turned down an offer to study medicine after SPM because of her fascination for engineering.

Noor Affida says, "It took only



Architect Ili admiring the completed feature wall in the Merdeka MRT station. — Photos: MMC Gamuda

two weeks after writing my final paper before I started work. I just couldn't wait to see the MRT underground construction phase from the beginning! And it was exactly what I imagined it to be."

Initially, it took her some time to adapt to the male-dominated construction industry but she did not let that intimidate her as she feels women can do just as well.

"It's not easy and sometimes I have to push hard but I welcome the challenges such as interfacing with surrounding stakeholders in the vicinity of my station. We walk the talk with stakeholders. We take ownership of the construction work on site.

"This is not to say there are no complaints but we manage it well.

The work is not hard but dealing with humans is more complex. I also have to coordinate with other departments so it's a good platform to build multiple skills," she says.

Her days are long and within the blink of an eye, Noor Affida noticed her weight had been steadily increasing since she joined the workforce.

She recalls, "I used to be a state hockey player and put on so much weight until I realised I couldn't go on like this. One day, I was listening to a radio station and the deejay was talking about checking sugar levels. That's when I decided to take charge of my personal health."

Noor Affida hired a personal trainer and sprung into action. She'd hit the gym after clocking out, and work on her cardiovascular endurance while incorporating some weight training. The trainer would put her through the phases three times a week while she'd spend another two days sweating it out on her own. Over the past two years, she has lost more than 35kg.

"Now I feel more energetic even when working long hours. Life has been good and every moment is a memorable one!"

## Dousing the fire

A tiny spark can ignite a fire of huge proportions. It can happen anywhere, anytime and when you least expect it.

As specialist instructor, Arziah Mohd Ahsim's role involves conducting training for all site employees working underground on MRT Line 1.

When the job was first offered to her, she did not feel confident she would be able to handle it but her supervisor insisted she gave it a try.

Arziah recalls, "My job initially involved doing more management and administrative duties

and after a year, my boss asked me to try fire training. A fire trainer had come from the United States and we all had to go for the training. I really enjoyed it. My boss must have noticed this and that's how I landed this role."

But first, Arziah had to conquer her fear of the dark.

"I'm quite a tomboyish character. I like speed, motorbikes, cars, extreme stuff and take part in obstacle races. However, when you throw me in the dark, I freeze! Slowly, I had to overcome this fear and learn how to move in the dark," says the graduate in management technology.

She runs her training once a week – every Tuesday in Serdang, Selangor, taking in a maximum of 10 trainees per class.

There are two stages to the training – the first involves flashover firefighting, where everything burns in a confined space. The second stage involves a tunnel fire scenario. And yes, actual fire is used.

"First, I equip participants with the theoretical knowledge if a fire breaks out on site. They have to save themselves first, not panic, and call for backup from the emergency response team," explains Arziah, 30, the sole female in her department. She oversees four juniors.

"The job is challenging and often only half the participants succeed in completing the course. The others cannot tolerate heat or pain and have to retake it. I've also sustained burns on my feet during my instructor training. My boss called it baby burns, though it was still painful!"

The Sarawakian mother-of-one loves her job and cannot think of doing anything else as empowering.

She says, "I'm also encouraged by the fact that managers and engineers on the MRT project pay more attention to housekeeping rules.



Seen here against the backdrop of the Kuala Lumpur city skyline is the Semantan North Portal, which is the interfacing point between the underground track and the elevated track of the KVMRT Sungai Buloh-Kajang line.

I've found my niche here and in the future, I'm thinking of taking classes in fire engineering."

## Developing people skills

As site architect, Ili Mazhusna Mukhtar is entrusted with putting the finishing touches to the Maluri station.

Daily, she has to liaise with sub-contractors and clients – arguments and disagreements are part and parcel of it. Sometimes, she finds herself becoming sort of a "middle-man" between sub-contractors and clients and this is where her coordination skills come in handy. That has also enabled the 27-year-old to develop her one-on-one skills, which is an asset in her job.

As the only woman in the Maluri Architectural Building Works Finishes operations department, which consists of several staff, Ili feels everyone is treated equally. There is no gender bias.

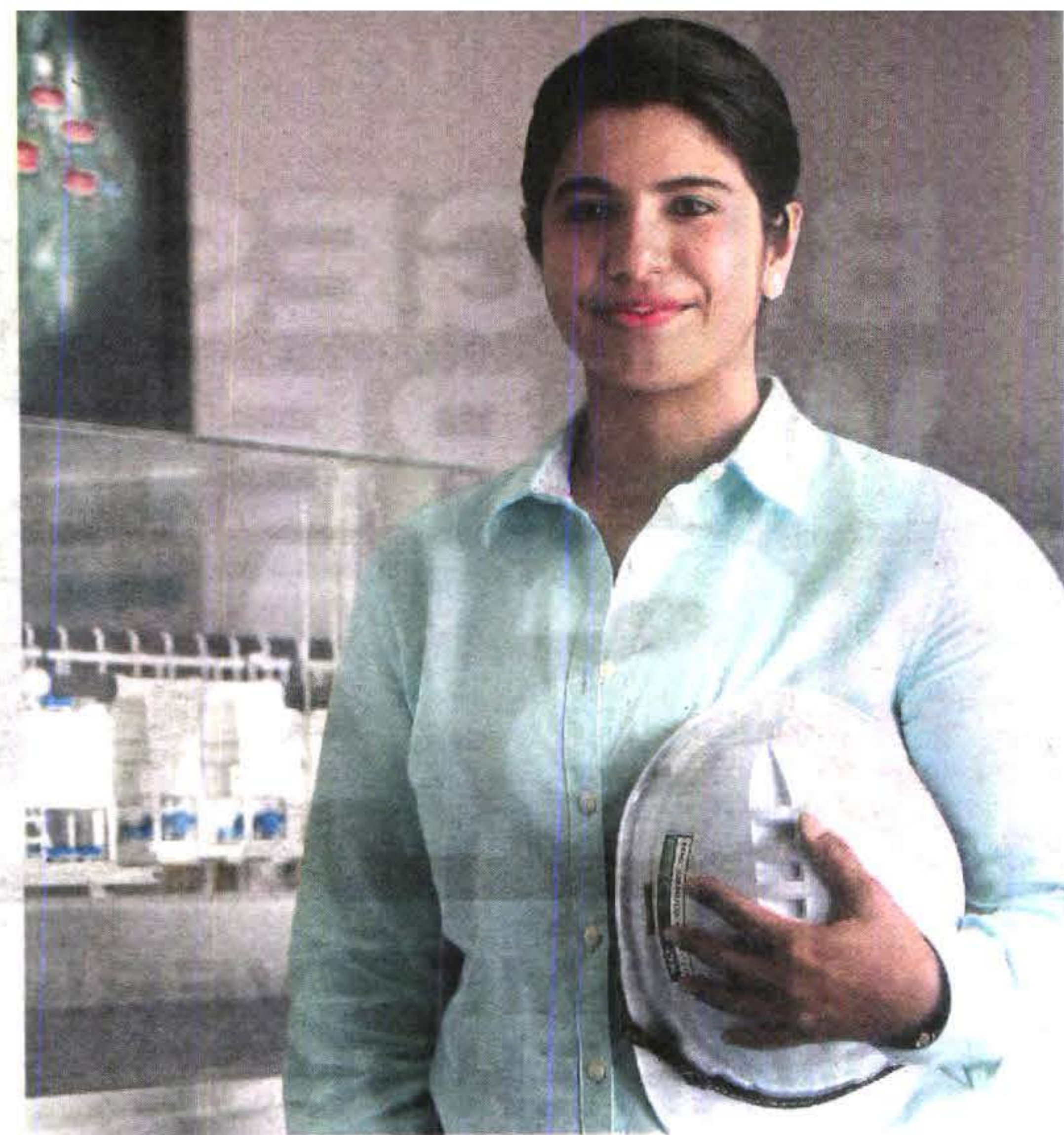
"They push me past my limits sometimes and I like it because I can improve. I'm a very people person but I've learnt from my superiors how to be firm and not be taken for a ride. I can manage people better now. I'm also a very detail-oriented person and that comes in handy when it comes to finishes," says the Universiti Teknologi Mara graduate.

Inevitably, there have been times when things did not go as planned but Ili takes it all in her stride and considers it a character-building experience.

"My goal is to someday be the resident architect of a project and my current role is a good platform to work myself up the ladder. Surprisingly, being a woman in this male-dominated industry is pretty empowering," says the cherubic, affable lady.

Ili puts in more than 10 hours on the job everyday, leaving her little time to socialise. But, being a filial daughter, she spends at least once a week with her parents and schedules some time to meet with friends.

She says, "The long hours don't affect me because there is nothing not to like about the job. I feel proud when I walk into Maluri station and look at its aesthetics. That's part of my contribution! Nothing can top that feeling."



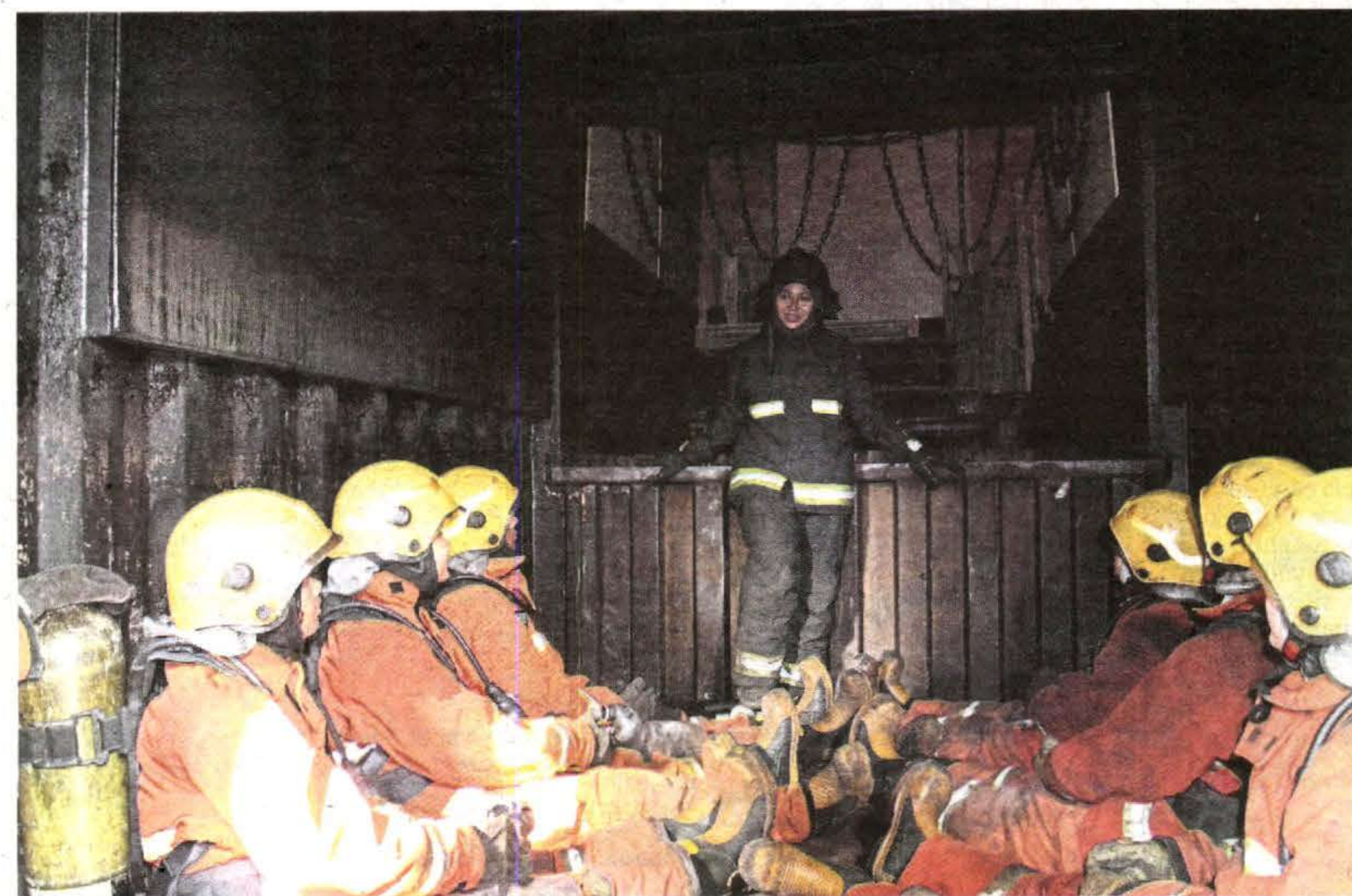
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Arziah had to conquer her fear of the dark before she could handle fire training. — Photos: IBRAHIM MOHTAR/The Star



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