

President Halimah's interest in law sparked by tough childhood

She wanted to give the vulnerable access to justice, she tells NUS law faculty magazine

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When she was a child growing up in a struggling household, President Halimah Jacob was seized with the idea of becoming a lawyer to give access to justice to the vulnerable and deprived.

Her family, already poor when her father was alive, was plunged into more hardship when he died. She spent much of her childhood years helping her mother run a cooked food stall.

"I witnessed how little power and voice those without resources have," Madam Halimah said in an interview published in last month's edition of the National University of Singapore (NUS) Faculty of Law alumni magazine.

It pushed her to study law at NUS, and later to join the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) as an in-house lawyer advising unions and workers on industrial relations and employment rights.

It was not a glamorous job in those days, and the labour movement was not considered a good paymaster. But for Madam Halimah, who ended up spending 33 years at NTUC, what mattered more was being able to fight for a fairer workplace.

While industrial relations were mostly peaceful then, she saw her role as helping to balance the bargaining power between unions and well-resourced employers.

"It was a very fulfilling period as I felt that I was giving voice to workers, fighting for their rights and ensuring a fairer workplace," she told LawLink magazine.

Even after entering politics in 2001, championing the welfare of vulnerable groups was a key focus for Madam Halimah.

As a backbencher MP from 2001 to 2011 – before she was appointed Minister of State in the then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports from 2011 to 2013 and later Speaker of Parliament from 2013 to 2017 – she had often spoken up on cost of living, affordable healthcare and fair employment issues.

When Madam Halimah joined politics, she was the first female Malay MP since independence.

She told LawLink that she wanted to contribute to the wider community, not just the labour movement, and also felt a responsibility to set an example for other women.

"One of my tasks in NTUC was to persuade younger women to take up leadership positions in their own unions or in NTUC.

"It was a daunting task because many cited the difficulty of balancing work and family as a huge deterrent," she added.

"Having spent time cajoling and persuading women to step up and be prepared to sacrifice for a higher purpose, I felt that I should practise that myself. I believe that it is important for women to be involved in policymaking and make their voices heard."

She would go on to break yet more glass ceilings – when she was

has focused on the core values of multiculturalism, meritocracy and stewardship, which she identified as fundamental to Singapore's continued success during her inaugural speech as head of state.

In that vein, she mooted the International Conference on Cohesive Societies, which brings together participants from around the world to promote understand-

ing among different communities.

The inaugural conference was held in 2019, with King Abdullah II of Jordan giving a keynote speech.

Madam Halimah said there are plans to hold a follow-up conference this year.

While she believes big strides have been made in Singapore to achieve gender equality, and hopes that she has paved the way

for other women, she acknowledged that "societal attitudes towards women have not fully modernised".

She noted that "there may still be expectations on women to shoulder more caregiving responsibilities, and preconceived notions of the roles women should play and how women should behave".

She cheered the ongoing efforts

to elevate women's status, such as the Year of Celebrating SG Women last year, but added that changing laws and policies alone will not work, even if it is important in framing the issues.

She said: "We need a strong mindset shift where women are treated with respect and as equal members of society."

Women have better education now, want equal opportunities and also want their voices to be heard, and there is no stopping this progress, she added.

Asked to give advice to women lawyers, she said: "My advice to women in law is to be the best that you can be and never settle for second fiddle."

"Never think from a position of weakness but from a position of strength."

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POSITION OF STRENGTH

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PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB