

Top Of The Class

These three women have successfully navigated a traditionally male-dominated industry, and excelled in their fields of specialisation in maritime law and shipping finance. They reveal why they chose to chart this career path, how they maintain work-life balance, and why this is a career worth considering.

Styling **Josiah Chua**, assisted by **Chloe Ong** Hair **Eileen Koh** Makeup **Keith Bryant Lee**, using **Makeup For Ever** Backdrop **Formica**

GAN SUE ANN

Counsel at Norton Rose Fulbright (Asia) LLP

“Shipping is in my blood,” declares Sue Ann, whose entire family is involved in the maritime industry. Her father is a managing director of a commercial diving and underwater ship maintenance company, while her mother used to work at Sembawang Shipyard. Her brother, who studied naval architecture, worked in an offshore oil and gas company before joining the family business a few years ago.

While Sue Ann always wanted to be a lawyer, it was only when she pursued her Masters in Law at the University College London that she saw how dynamic and exciting the industry could be. It was there that Sue Ann met the founder of London Shipping Law Centre Dr Aleka Mandaraka-Sheppard, who encouraged her to join her admiralty law class, and eventually inspired her to become a maritime lawyer. “I thought that specialising in maritime law would tie in neatly with my father’s business,” says Sue Ann.

As a maritime lawyer, what are the highlights that get your adrenaline racing?

I was a shipping litigator when I started practice. One of the more interesting aspects at that time was going on board vessels and arresting them. However, as a ship finance lawyer, the stress usually peaks days before a transaction closes, and the adrenaline comes from the time pressure in getting the deal to close, especially in cross-border transactions.

Have you ever felt any pressure working in a male-centric corporate environment?

Not at all. Genders should not define an industry. In the last 10 years, I have seen more women joining the shipping industry, so it is no longer such a male-dominated industry. With increased career awareness and guidance in schools, alongside initiatives led by the industry, there are more women seeking jobs in the maritime sector. I believe that anyone can achieve success if you work hard and remain passionate about the work.

How do you maintain work-life balance?

This is a daily challenge for me as I have two young kids. My daughter is five and my son is two. I get the usual “what time are you coming home” calls. It is difficult but it helps to work for a supportive firm. As for myself, I try to fit in an extra session of yoga practice during busy periods as I find that helps to calm the mind.

Would you encourage young lawyers to take up maritime law?

Yes! The practice of maritime law is diverse. Singapore is one of the world’s leading maritime capitals, and the Government has also been doing a lot to promote the country as a leading marketplace for shipping. Singapore is indeed a great place to practice maritime law!

“Genders should not define an industry.”

—
GAN SUE ANN



Polyester coat, from H&M. Cotton top, from CH by Carolina Herrera. Silk-polyester skirt, from COS. Shoes and earrings, stylist's own. Table, from Commune.



Hardware necklace, from In Good Company. Acrylic and brass earrings, from Bimba Y Lola. Dress, Tara's own. Bangles, stylist's own.

“Over the years, I have grown more confident and have learnt to speak my mind when I think it is necessary.”

TARA MARIA DAVENPORT

TARA DAVENPORT
Instructor, Faculty of Law,
National University of Singapore

One of Tara's earliest childhood memories was of visiting her father's shipping company at International Plaza, where she would see photographs of small ships named after her, such as Tara Maria I or Tara Tiffany. When her father passed away, the then 24-year-old stepped in to help manage the company, before moving on to practise shipping law.

Tara had always been interested in international law, and decided to combine it with her other passion, maritime law, by becoming a researcher specialising in the Law of the Sea, which is the law governing the rights and obligations of nations in the oceans. She is currently working on her Doctor of the Science of Law (JSD) at Yale Law School.

What are the most interesting aspects of oceans and maritime law that intrigue you?

I am interested in how governments and states have devised international law and regulations governing ocean space, which – as you know – is a unique environment. States have always treated the oceans like property that can be owned, and the first three hundred years of the development of the Law of the Sea was deciding ownership of the oceans and the resources within.

Over the last 50 years, there has been an increasing focus on protecting the marine environment, and this has had a huge impact on the international framework governing the oceans. One of the most interesting aspects is the use of the law to resolve problems that occur in the oceans.

What are some maritime disputes that you are currently interested in and researching?

The South China Sea disputes are particularly fascinating to me because they bring together a mix of law, history, geopolitics and geography, and also because the disputes have a great impact on the South-east Asian region. I am also interested in the disputes between China, Japan and Korea in the East China Sea. My current research is on the regime governing deep sea mining in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

What qualities does a person need to possess to be an academic?

You need to have a lot of self-discipline and motivation because the deadlines you set are mostly your own.

How do you juggle family and work?

I have great family support in the form of a very hands-on husband, and my mum who helps out with my three children. I was lucky to have understanding bosses at my old firm who appreciated my need to be home at a certain time, allowed me to take my work home and were more flexible with their deadlines.

What advice do you have for those who want to pursue a career in maritime law?

You do not always have to go down the tried-and-tested route of getting a training contract at a law firm immediately after graduation. Don't be afraid to explore different avenues, like joining a shipping company or government agency that deals with maritime issues, or even doing research in maritime law at a research institute. These opportunities will give you more practical, hands-on experience that will equip you to deal with all the multi-faceted issues that arise in practice.

JULIANA YAP
Consultant at AsiaLegal LLC

She grew up wanting to be a pilot, but when Juliana joined her secondary school's debate team, her friends and teachers encouraged her to become a lawyer instead. She did exactly that, graduating with a law degree and doing her pupillage at a boutique maritime law firm in Singapore. The experience spurred her on to pursue a career in maritime law. "It was very interesting to see the law at work in a very dynamic industry," says Juliana. She represents clients in asset finance and corporate transactions in the shipping, marine and offshore sectors.

Tell us what you think about diversity of the maritime industry.

The maritime industry has traditionally been male-dominated. A certain degree of stereotyping persists but need not be perpetual. The diversity challenge is in any case multi-faceted. That said, gender diversity in the industry has improved over the years, thanks to initiatives such the International Maritime Organization's programme on the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector.

Women today have better access to education and training than their predecessors. As more women rise to leadership positions, the drive towards greater diversity in the industry should hopefully gain momentum.

What do you find most satisfying as a lawyer specialising in shipping finance?

What makes my work enjoyable is the constructive environment where parties on both sides of the table strive towards the common purpose of reaching a deal. The negotiations may be hard-fought, but at the same time, you are helping to create value for all the different parties involved, especially the client.

I find this rewarding and satisfying, and this should provide any young lawyer, regardless of gender, a compelling reason to consider a career in this area of the maritime legal profession. It helps that Singapore is one of the world's top maritime capitals based on a recent Menon Report. Legal services are an essential part of any maritime capital, and Singapore scores highly (fourth after London, Oslo and New York) in maritime finance and law.

What are the highlights of your job?

The most exciting transactions are the ones where a high level of involvement is required in the structuring or the negotiation of their terms. These can also span multiple jurisdictions. And when the closing of a deal involves parties such as ship owners, ship registries, financial institutions and shipyards located in different places in the world, the window period for that to happen can be very small. A lot of preparation goes into closing a deal like this. As a lawyer, being present for the client 24/7, whenever necessary, is par for the course.

In your free time, how do you kick back and relax?

I enjoy going for long walks with my golden retriever Piper. I also like to sit back and read a book whenever I can find the time.

How do you maintain work-life balance?

There are two rules I follow. First, keep it meaningful – for me, it means giving back to society. Pro bono work for good causes is something close to my heart. I am in the Law Society's Project Law Help committee, an initiative that facilitates the provision of pro bono legal services to charities, voluntary welfare organisations and social enterprises. I also volunteer pro bono legal services through the Law Society's Pro Bono Services Office.

The second rule is a simple one, but requires a great deal of discipline – knowing when to switch off from work.

"Legal services are an essential part of any maritime capital, and Singapore scores highly in maritime finance and law."

—
JULIANA YAP



Silk dress, from CH by Carolina Herrera. Hardware necklace, from In Good Company. Brass and resin bracelet, from Bimba Y Lola. Shoes, Juliana's own. Chair, from VCUUS.