

# TO WORK WITH A PURPOSE

SHE WORKS IN AMERICA'S SILICON VALLEY. HER MENTORSHIP REACHES OUT TO MIDDLE EASTERN AND AFRICAN WOMEN, AND HELPS INDONESIANS WITH THEIR STARTUPS.

**F**OR Sonita Lontoh, a visit to Jakarta does not mean she will spend all her time with her beloved mother, Constance Lontoh. Like on her last visit two weeks ago, she spent a couple of days attending the World Economic Forum in East Asia, where global leaders from government, business, international organizations, academia and civil society met to dialogue on how to improve cooperation. "I was invited," she said.

Sonita was panelist in a private session billed 'Energy Reforms for Sustainable Growth'. It was a topic right up her alley. Jakarta-born Sonita, who has been living in the United States since 1993 is the head of Global Corporate Marketing of Triliant, a venture-backed technology company in Silicon Valley that has projects in the United States, Europe and Asia.

But Sonita is probably better known for her activities outside of work.

She is passionate about education on green technology and is active in initiatives for women leadership projects. Sonita is a mentor for the TechWomen program, a US State Department's women in technology project, spearheaded by former Secretary Hillary Clinton. The program aims at matching young women from the Middle East and Africa with professional women in Silicon Valley.

Sonita was also active in Clean Energy Education and Empowerment, a program initiated by the US Energy Department and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to empower women.





For Indonesia, Sonita has done a number of encouraging projects. Besides co-founding and chairing the board of the Indonesian Diaspora Foundation, Sonita is also a co-founder and executive director of Silicon Valley Asia (SVA) Technology Alliance, a non-profit focusing on increasing global cross-collaboration between Silicon Valley and the technology and business communities in Indonesia.

Not surprisingly, Sonita Lontoh is the recipient of many awards. In 2012, she was named a 'Global Emerging Leader under 40' by the National Association of Asian MBAs in the US. She has also been invited to the White House for a celebration honoring 'Women Champions of Change'. In the same year, she received from Indonesia the Diaspora Entrepreneurship and Corporate Excellence Award.



FROM early on, Sonita showed a passion for maths and science. So her business-people parents suggested she find

ment at Northwestern University.

And then her life changed.

At the age of 28, Sonita felt it was no longer enough going into commercial enterprises that combined technology with business. She wanted to have a say in one more thing: policy. "I wanted work that was purposeful," she said, adding that "In my business, there are many idealistic people."

She also felt she wanted to get into the emerging economy sectors. The options were healthcare or renewable energy. "It worked out," Sonita said. She joined Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), a Fortune 200 energy-based holding company in San Francisco. "That was when I started to work in green energy."

At the time, PG&E was seeking to further develop the renewable energy and smart energy fields. The US was endeavoring to reduce its gas emissions and other environmental impacts by using more renewable resources, such as solar and wind energy, widely used in California.

Two years later Trilliant offered her to

Eastern and African women already involved in technology to their more established counterparts in Silicon Valley.

Each participant in the program gets a mentor from the Valley. For one whole month, these participants intern at the mentor's company. "It is about building relationships, and about building knowledge," Sonita said.

Living in the USA for more than 20 years, Sonita had few opportunities to get in contact with fellow Indonesians, and had seldom been involved in the activities of her fellow country-people there.

This changed drastically in 2012, when the Congress of the Indonesia Diaspora was held in Los Angeles.

Sonita suddenly started being actively involved in the Indonesian community, and ended up co-founding and chairing the Indonesian Diaspora Foundation board.

She has helped to conduct several of the foundation's various programs, such as the 'Computers for School', the 'Foster Family One on One', and the 'Diaspo-

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a course that combined engineering and business. After completing high school in Jakarta, she enrolled in Industrial Engineering and Operation Research, at the University of California, Berkeley.

She and two friends then founded an online game company with operations in Greater China. This meant frequent commuting between San Francisco and Beijing. After about five years, she sold her company as is usual for technology companies in the US. "Usually, they have an exit strategy: get sold or go public," Sonita said. "That's the way investors get their money back."

She tried her hand with several corporations, one of them being Bain & Company, before deciding to continue her education.

Thus she dropped out of the corporate world and went back to campus. She obtained her Masters in Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where she was also a cross-registered graduate student at the Harvard Business School. Meanwhile, she managed to squeeze in an MBA on Strategy and Marketing from the Kellogg School of Manage-

take on a new challenge. "I moved from a user company to a vendor company selling smart technology."

Sonita travelled all over the world, including to Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand for her project. For the job, she has spoken at various international conferences, and spends a lot of time educating consumers on the benefits of green technology, particularly smart grid energy.



AND then in a conference on women in technology, Sonita was approached by a man who said, "You should be a mentor for TechWomen." That was the first time she had ever heard of the program, which had been running for about two years.

She agreed to be a mentor, as well as a member of the Selection Committee. The program was initiated by Hillary Clinton, who thought the US needed to build strong relationships with Middle Eastern and African countries, through women and technology initiatives. One of her tasks is matching young Middle

ra for Diaspora'.

She still felt she could do more, especially something related to her fields of technology and business.

Last October, joining up with some friends in California and Shinta Dhanwardoyo of *Bubu.com* in Jakarta, Sonita founded the Silicon Valley Asia (SVA) Technology Alliance. Basically their aim is to bridge the technology ecosystem in Indonesia with that in Silicon Valley.

The Alliance's very first project will be run this month.

SVA Technology Alliance will bring six to seven Indonesian technology entrepreneurs to Silicon Valley and have them undergo boot-camp for a week. They will get training and be jolted with ideas on how to raise funds, manage start-ups, make an enterprise grow, and finally, how to get acquired by a bigger company.

She also aims to build a solid network in Silicon Valley. "We take in groups that we think we can help the most," said Sonita, who still plans to keep her Indonesian citizenship.

● PURWANI DIYAH PRABANDARI