

## Malay women: Religiosity, philanthropy and non-violence

Abdul Rashid Moten \*

**Abstract:** Islam is a religion of justice and peace and regards men and women as equally obliged with regard to acts of worship and interactions with others. The Qur'an addresses the believers using the expression, "believing men and women". There is no gender bias, precedence, or prejudice in the essential language of the Qur'an. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) confirmed that women have souls in exactly the same way as men and will enter paradise if they do good. This study examines the role played by women in history, discusses the policies adopted by the government of Malaysia vis-a-vis and analyses the role played by two Muslim women, among others, in socio-economic and political arena. Based upon documentary sources and unstructured interviews, this study found that the government of Malaysia has adopted many policies to up-lift the status of women and that women have been playing an active role in Malaysia locally and globally. The two women, highlighted in this study, are highly religious, taking part in philanthropic activities, and actively promoting non-violence and peace at home and abroad.

**Keywords:** Malay women, philanthropy, religiosity, non-violence and peace, Malaysia.

### Introduction

The Qur'an, manifesting equality between men and women, addresses the believers using the expression, "believing men and women". There is no gender bias, precedence, or prejudice in the essential language of the Qur'an. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) confirmed that women have souls in exactly the same way as men and will enter paradise if they do good. In Islam, a woman is a completely independent personality. She can make any contract or bequest in her own name. Consequently, women, in the early phases of Muslim history, took active part in

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\* Abdul Rashid Moten, *Ph.D.*, is Professor of Political Science and Senior Academic Fellow, Centre for Islamisation, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: rashidmoten@gmail.com

the family and community by assisting their husbands in the fields, carrying on trade and commerce, and going out of their homes to promote peace in society.

Despite this historical reality, non-Muslims' views of Islam have generally been negative. They constantly produce new prototypes to express their apparently ingrained hatred of "Islam."

In the 1970s we were haunted by the image of the immensely rich oil sheikh; in the 1980s by the fanatical ayatollah; since the Salman Rushdie affair, 'Islam' has become a religion that spells death to creativity and artistic freedom. But none of these images reflects the reality, which is infinitely more complex (Armstrong, 2001:38).

Malaysia is one country which defies the portrayal of Muslim women in a negative light. Malaysian women play an active role in the family and in the community. They also play important roles in public life as administrators in organizations and teachers in schools, community organizers and peace advocates.

This study traces the role played by women in history, briefly describes Malaysian society, and examines the policies adopted by the government of Malaysia to empower women. Finally, this study analyses the role played by two Muslim women, among others, in promoting peace locally and globally. The two women, highlighted in this study, are religious, taking part in philanthropic activities, and actively promoting non-violence and peace.

### **Malay Women in the pre-independence phase**

Long before colonisation, Malay women were involved actively in the public domain, particularly in economic development activities. They enjoyed property and inheritance rights and a degree of freedom to work. They were involved in agriculture as well as in trading activities. Yet they did not neglect their roles as daughters, wives and mothers. They were religious, performing the prescribed rituals and caring the needy.

Since Malay women lacked access to formal modern schooling, they were not able to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the country. Muslim reformers like Syed Sheikh al-Hadi (1867-1934), Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin (1869-1956) and their contemporaries in the Islamic movement (known as *KaumMuda*) spread the idea of Malay girls receiving modern education along

with the boys. A small group of women, including Shamsiah Fakeh (1924-2008), Khatija Sidek (1918-1982) and others understood the importance of English education alongside religious education. They established, in 1929, the “Persekutuan Guru-Guru Perempuan Johore” (Malay Women Teachers Association, Johore) under the leadership of Hajjah Zainun binti Suleiman (1903-1989), popularly known as Ibu Zain (Mother Zain). She was the Supervisor of a Malay Girls’ School who later emerged as the leader of KaumIbu UMNO (KI UMNO). She also established a woman’s magazine, *Bulan Melayu* published in Jawi, a form of Malay written in an alphabet primarily derived from Arabic and with strong Islamic links. The magazine and the association worked to improve the position of Malay women in society by providing women an opportunity to develop and articulate skills and ideas, all in the context of Malay/Islamic identity. In 1940, Azizah Jafar (1897-1975) established another women’s association, the Malay Ladies Association in Johor. This Association aimed at encouraging the wives of Malay leaders to do social work; offer writing and reading classes for adults and to teach girls the art of cooking and sewing (Tumin, 2006:4). These women were unhappy about the colonial policy of promoting ethnicity which resulted in each ethnic group, Chinese, Indians and Malays, preserving their own social and cultural identities and remaining almost entirely culturally distinct from the others. Under these circumstances, politics was viewed as “a process of managing inter-ethnic divisions, tensions, and conflicts amidst the efforts of avowedly ethnic based political parties to advance the interest of ‘their communities’” (Teik, 1995: xvii).

Subsequently, the Malay women, encouraged by their male counterparts, joined the demonstrations to challenge the British plan for the Malayan Union that weakened the position of traditional rulers, took away the autonomy enjoyed by the states, and granted equal citizenship rights to Malays and non-Malays. One notable female political organization that emerged out of these protests was Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS, Conscious Womens’ Front) which was created in 1946 and was led by Aishah Ghani (1923-2013) (Dancz, 1987: 97).” AWAS members also joined the daily congregational prayers in mosques and organized kenduri (mass feasts), using these occasions to spread awareness about anti-colonial activities” (Aljunied, 2013: 165). Given its militancy, AWAS could not survive long. Its members were absorbed into the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) as its women political auxiliary. They took an active part

in public demonstrations and rallies opposing the Malayan Union. According to a British colonial officer:

In towns, there were demonstrations with 5,000 to 10,000 people standing in front of us. But the most remarkable thing of all—by far the most remarkable thing of all—was the part the women were playing in this great national movement.... If one can say there is such a thing as a national movement, then here it is (Cited in Aljunied, 2013: 156).

The KI strengthened UMNO, opposed Malayan Union and pushed for independence. The KI also fought and succeeded in getting the women's right to vote enshrined in the Federation of Malaya Agreement subsequently ratified by the British government in 1947. They did their best to evolve a Malaysian identity based upon nationality rather than ethnicity. Consequently, despite occasional skirmishes, there was peaceful co-existence among the races. People may or may not mix; they hardly interfered in each other's activities.

### **Government initiatives after independence**

Malaysia gained independence from the British in 1957. It occupies a landmass of 329,847 square kilometres (127,350 sq. mi) divided into two parts: Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Malaysian Borneo). It is a federal parliamentary democracy composed of 13 states and three federal territories. The population of Malaysia, as of January 1, 2016, was estimated to be 30,572,466 people of whom 50.7 per cent are male (Malaysia Population, 2016). One of the central features of Malaysian political life is the state's multi-ethnic character with Malays (and indigenous people) forming the majority. The other races are Chinese, Indians, and a few other ethnicities. The Malays make up about half of the total population and are politically dominant. They are Muslims, an identity which is enshrined in the Constitution of Malaysia. Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (2010) defines "Malay" as a person who, is born to a Malaysian citizen, professes the religion of Islam, speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay custom. Article 3 categorically declares Islam as "the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation."

The government cautiously embarked upon infusing Islam in its administration. Television and radio broadcast religious programmes, television

programmes are interrupted at the commencement of the five prayer times, and Islamic lessons and courses are introduced in the curricular of schools and universities. In 1997, the government established the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) with a Minister in charge of Islamic affairs. In 1998, the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, pioneered the policy of Islamizing government. To Mahathir, Malaysia has always been driven by, and adhered to, the fundamentals of Islam. His successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2008), introduced the concept of Islam Hadhari (Civilisational Islam), which calls upon Muslims to adapt to the rapidly changing social and economic realities of the time at home and abroad.

Additionally, successive governments of Malaysia has introduced certain Shari'ah institutes into the public domain such as Islamic Banking Scheme (1982), Islamic Insurance (Takaful, 1985), Islamic Accepted Bills (equivalent to Bankers Acceptance) and Islamic Expert Refinancing Scheme (1990). The interest-free banking system was also made available to the conventional banks (1993) as alternatives. Thus, Islam, the state religion, along with Bahasa Malayu (the Malay language) became the chief component of Malay identity.

It is worth noting that Malaysian women's rights to participate in the political and administrative life of the country are guaranteed by Article 8, clause 1 of the Federal Constitution, which states that "all persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law." Article 8(2) states categorically that "there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent, place of birth and gender in any law or in the appointment to any office...." Article 12 (1) guarantees the right to education, regardless of gender, for all Malaysians. Thus, the government has enacted many laws and policies to empower women.

The National Policy for Women, formulated in 1989, aimed at integrating women in the development of the country by ensuring an equitable share in the acquisition of resources, information, opportunities and benefits of development for women. In 1997, the Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women was adopted. Both these documents were reviewed and approved by the Government in 2009 with the aim of integrating women in all the sectors of national development. The 6<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (1991-1995) allocated special fund for the development of women. All the plans that followed continued to focus on the

needs of women in various positions in society. Additionally, the government agreed to the commitments set forth in the Beijing Platform for Action at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (1995). There also exists a Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, established on January 17, 2001, dedicated to the development of women in line with Malaysia's commitment towards the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Given these policies and programmes, the participation rate of women in the work force increased from 46.4 per cent in 2009 to 49.5 per cent in 2012 and rose to 53.6 per cent in 2014 (and estimated to be 55 percent in 2015) (Economic Planning Unit, 2015: 3-7). The 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) promises a number of measures to harness "women talent at all levels, and create more opportunities for women to participate in the economy, and increase the female labour participation rate to 59 percent, by 2020" (Economic Planning Unit, 2015: 6). Women occupying top management positions in the public sector increased from 30.5 per cent in 2010 to 32.5 per cent in 2014. In the same year, women accounted for 61 per cent of total graduate enrolment in public higher learning Institutions. For studies leading to PhD, women, in 2015, accounted for about 60 per cent. Women also accounted for about 68 per cent from the total of 41,573 intakes in the public higher learning institutions to pursue undergraduate programs for the academic session 2013/2014. In general, the literacy rate of Malaysian women has increased from 88.4 per cent in year 2005 to 93.2 per cent in 2015. In short, in 2013, the Ministry of Women and Family Development (n. d.: 63) concluded:

Malaysian women have made significant progress in almost all areas since Malaysia's independence in 1957. Their achievements have no doubt been facilitated by inclusive policies and plan of action developed by the Government of Malaysia.

### **Malay women and peace**

Malaysian women in the post-colonial phase have become modern without sacrificing tradition. These women do not consider modernity and tradition as polar opposites. They, therefore, acquired English education and aspired to be modern without abandoning their traditional ways of looking at and doing things. The Malaysian society contains both traditional and modern elements, and individuals operate with remarkable effectiveness in the two discrete worlds of experience through a process of compartmentalization. It is interesting to observe a Malay business woman who

has the required “modern” entrepreneurial attitudes but in her home setting, she operates according to the “traditional” mode of behaviour. Modernity, in such a case, does not replace the tradition but is added to it.

In general, Malay Muslim women are religious but have adopted certain modern attitudes and behaviour. They work in the offices, bureaucracies and industries but adopt conservative styles of dress and wear the headscarf or tudung. Their veils extend over their chest, leaving only the face visible. It is common to find places of worship in offices and work places. Thus, Malay women pray five times a day, fast, and are concerned about proper behaviour and proper clothing. Yet they advocate women’s active participation in the political and economic spheres.

Malay women organizations, in the post-independence phase, have moved beyond ethnicity and embraced the concept of “unity in diversity.” This is evident in the transformation of KaumIbu UMNO to Wanita UMNO (Women’s wing of the dominant Malay party, United Malays National Organisation or UMNO), which is the largest and most active women’s organisation associated with UMNO. The major objective of Wanita UMNO is “to maintain national peace and stability through the creation of a just and fair society ... (and) to reinvigorate the participation of Wanita UMNO at the international level so that it can voice, support and champion women’s issues specifically, and world issues generally” (Kausar, 2006:32-33). Similarly, the women’s wing (Dewan Muslimat) of the opposition Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) declared its mission: “to create an ethical society in all fields of human life, upholding the true Islamic teachings; and to create diligent (*mujahidah*), knowledgeable, faithful, practicing, god-conscious women, playing the role as *da’i* in the society” (Kausar, 2006: 84). Wanita UMNO and similar women’s organisations believe in empowering women to tackle problems by collective will and joint action. Admittedly, women’s representation in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government are not at par with the number of women in the country. This, however, is counterbalanced by quite strong input from women in NGOs demanding economic empowerment and an increase in women’s leadership and participation in all areas that affect their lives.

### **Empirical studies on women and peace**

An ethnographic study of 26 Malay women from three universities in Peninsular Malaysia between May and October 2011 in Malaysia, found those interviewed confident and willing to help women to achieve the same rights as men so that they could contribute to the development of the country as a whole (Moten,

2012). The interviewees, selected using a purposive and snowball sampling, were educated, 22 of whom held a Ph.D. and the remaining four obtained a Master's degree from within and outside Malaysia.

Seventeen of the 26 interviewees worked with political parties and other non-governmental organizations. They campaigned for their respective parties but they also raised women issues and were actively involved in joint action, advocacy and lobbying of issues pertaining to women, development and justice. They occasionally gather to study the Qur'an and 15 of them performed pilgrimage (hajj). They desire stricter Islamic law in practice and 19 of them advocated empowering religious authorities to play an active role in maintaining morality in public life. All of them placed Islam as their identity but they would love to learn about other religions and participate in interfaith dialogues. Three of the women interviewed had worked in disaster areas in Aceh as members of Mercy Malaysia.

Malaysian women are concerned about the poor, the needy and relatives. A nation-wide quantitative survey with a sample of 2,640 women, conducted by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), found about 79 per cent was engaged in "care work" in the family particularly for children and the elderly. The percentage increased to about 84 among those women who were not employed. Apparently, women do "care work" in the family regardless of their work status" (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). They had specific role models to whom they looked up to. These role models include, among others, the Prophet's first wife, Khadijat al-Kubra and his third wife, Aishah bint Abu Bakr and in contemporary times, Dr. Jamilah Mahmood who led the philanthropic organization, Mercy Malaysia, and Dr Muhaya Hj Mohamed, a renowned Malaysian ophthalmologist and a motivational speaker. These two Malaysian role models merit a brief discussion in terms of their religiosity, philanthropy, and

### **Dr. Jemilah Mahmood**

Dr. Jemilah Mahmood is a medical doctor who, until 2009, worked as a consultant obstetrician and a gynaecologist at Ampang Puteri Specialist Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. She founded Mercy Malaysia (Malaysian Medical Relief Society) in 1999, a non-profit organization, and served as its president for 10 years (1999-2010).

Born in 1959, Jemilah came “from a mixed parentage”. Her father was a typical civil servant and her mother was Chinese, “a born Buddhist who became a Christian, and then became a Muslim”. Thus, “she was born with a gift of diversity” (Dr. Jemila Mahmodd, 2014). Her parents used to bring in homeless people to stay with them which taught her the meaning of sympathy and empathy early in her childhood. She attended Assunta Girls School, named after an Italian nun, Maria Assunta Pallota, which instilled in her the importance of helping others as well as the desire to become a medical doctor. Jemilah graduated from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (the National University of Malaysia, UKM) in 1986 and received her postgraduate degree in Obstetrics and Gynaecology from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in the United Kingdom which elevated her to a Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in 2004.

Jemilah practiced and lectured at the UKM and served as a research fellow at Tokyo University. In 2009, she completed the Programme for Executive Development at the International Institute of Management and Development (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. She joined Khazanah National (Research and Investment Strategy) in 2011 and served as the chief of World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat from May 2014 until August 2015. For her work in humanitarianism and peace building, she received many local and international awards. She is the first Malaysian woman to receive the Gandhi, King, Ikeda Award, created to celebrate human rights and non-violence. In 2003, she was honoured with the First East Asia Women’s Peace Award (Humanitarian Service category) in Manila, Philippines for leadership in advocacy and lifelong work in intercultural fellowship, regional peace and international understanding. In 2013, she received the Isa award for service to humanity in Bahrain. In 2002, she received Dato’ Paduka Mahkota Perak (DPMP); in 2003, Panglima Jasa Negara (PJN); and in 2009, the Panglima Setia Mahkota (PSM) which carries the title Tan Sri. In 2013, she received Isa Award for Service to Humanity in Bahrain. Jemilah is married to a gynaecologist, Dr. Ashar Abdullah and is a mother of two sons: Adam Ashar and Omar Ashar.

### **Religiosity and social harmony**

Jemilah, as stated earlier, grew up in a mixed parentage family with 13 siblings and half-siblings of different beliefs (Islamic, Christian and Buddhist). From this,

she learnt that respect and love, are very important, irrespective of colour, religion or faith. Jemilah, however, was very much influenced by her father who was a Muslim civil servant. Jemilah is a practicing Muslim, always decently dressed, and believes that it is obligatory upon Muslims to do good, forbid evil and enjoin others to do virtuous deeds. She realized that there is a need for Muslims to be true to the enduring values of their own past while living in the modern world. They must maintain the legacy of the past and integrate change in society and their lives. Jemilah is unhappy with the people who talk about liberalising Islam because their perception of being liberal is to follow Western ways in toto. She believes that Muslims can become modern without becoming Western.

Islam requires believers to be educated. Islam's emphasis is on the idea of brotherhood, social justice, equality and tolerance. Islam requires that women be treated with respect. To Jemilah, gender has never been a hindrance. She would not "blame gender for non-achievement." "Leadership", she argues, "is something you have to grab to make things happen." In certain circumstances, being a woman is advantageous because it allows access to other women and, by extension, to their families and their cultures. "It changes the way you look at the situation and subsequently design programs" (IMD, 2013). Women should nevertheless be empowered through education so that they may effectively contribute to the socio-economic development of the country. On a personal note, Dr. Jemilah desired to be an inspiring role model for her children. She, therefore, balanced her life pursuing her passion and making time for the family. According to her, "I can fly to two countries in a day and meet new people every minute but nothing can compare to even a single second with my family" (Nay Azman, 2014).

To Dr. Jemilah, Islam is mainly about helping others and caring for others. "It is in our faith to care for other people" (BNA Interview, n.d.). It is untenable for a Muslim society like Malaysia to call itself developed if Malaysians do not care about other people. She laments that Malaysians have become highly materialistic. "They measure success and development by material wealth and construction of tall buildings. However, the world around us is suffering and Malaysians are not doing their part as Muslims" (Dr. Jemilah Mahmood, 2014). She believes that "a measure of the development of a nation is when its people can think of others who need help irrespective of race, religion, culture or boundary"

(Dina Murad, 2014). She felt great satisfaction when she led a team of MERCY volunteers to the tsunami hit Aceh, Indonesia in 2004. There she helped people in rebuilding homes and giving medical support to the sick, which contributed a good deal and made a difference in the life of people in Aceh. For her, faith has always been her guide. “I think the thing that anchors me is my faith. I want to be able to say I’ve done my best and I can make others’ lives better” (Dina Murad, 2014).

### **Philanthropy**

Jemilah’s family was the bedrock of her philanthropic ambitions. Her parents were very generous: “My parents had no hesitation in helping people, feeding them and finding them jobs, so we used to have lots of people sleeping in our house. ... My parents were not rich but whatever they had, they shared” (Zarina Abubakar, 2014). Her parents never talked about their philanthropy. They quietly send donations to mosques and other places.

Jemilah’s philanthropic activities began in 1999 with a mission to Kosovo where thousands of lives were lost and suffering was widespread. Thereafter, she led several humanitarian missions made up of Malaysians with the goal of helping others irrespective of race, religion or culture. She led a mission to Afghanistan in late 2001 and 2002 and took the initiative to establish the Women and Children’s Health Centre in Kandahar. Subsequently, this centre has been transformed into a primary healthcare centre run by local staff.

In 2004, when the Sudan was suffering from deep conflict, Jemilah went to West Darfur and witnessed the poor standards of health care. She negotiated with the local authorities and established a Reproductive Health Centre in El Geneina. This centre is equipped with a labour ward, operating facility, and antenatal and neonatal care. The Centre, in association with the local health authorities, provides training to midwives and doctors” (Frost, 2015). In the same year, Jemilah led a major humanitarian mission in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, which rendered over 570,000 people homeless in Indonesia alone. According to Jemilah, “We assimilated with the crowd and got to know them and their needs. We used their networks so that it was very much a local response” (Tam, 2014). She arranged for emergency medical relief, primary healthcare and psychosocial assistance. In response to the need for Indonesian health officers, Dr. Jemilah, with the assistance of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and nursing

colleges, arranged training courses for Indonesian nurses in Malaysia. She also helped build a new nursing college in Aceh.

Dr. Jemilah also took the initiative to help reconstruct medical facilities, homes and orphanages. Jemilah has also rushed to assist the survivors of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar; those affected by the West Sumatran earthquakes; and those in need of assistance in Pakistan, Philippines, Somalia, Iraq, Gaza and other places. She has braved war zones and disaster areas to help her fellow human beings, as required by her faith, Islam. During a 2003 mission in Iraq, “she even suffered a bullet in her left hip for five days because she felt others were in more urgent need of medical attention” (Tam, 2014).

In short, Dr. Jemilah has never wavered from assisting the vulnerable and for those in need of support. In her desire to help those who have survived human and natural disasters, Dr. Jemilah has put her own life in danger on a number of occasions. She has lived and worked in war zones and disaster areas. Additionally, she has been advocating and voicing her opinions, especially on humanitarian injustices. Dr. Jemilah has transcended misconceptions and bridged the gender and religious divides with her services to humanity.

### **Peace-building**

Dr. Jemilah laments that though the media regularly highlights the negative images of war, people are somehow insensitive and think that wars are normal. They show no concern for those whose lives are devastated by wars. Wars should stop and those suffering the ravages of war should be taken care of irrespective of race, religion or culture. This calls for effective organisations like MERCY MALAYSIA which she led till 2010. During her tenure as the President, she succeeded in gathering Malaysians to serve the humanity and the needy. MERCY MALAYSIA’s mission is to provide “medical relief, sustainable health-related development and risk reduction activities for vulnerable communities” (Mercy Malaysia, 2014).

MERCY MALAYSIA has been using what is known as Total Disaster Risk Management in order to make the affected communities more resilient. It looks into all the phases of a disaster: prevention/mitigation; preparedness; response; and rehabilitation and reconstruction. “It was about listening to people, engaging local actors, and understanding local context and culture.” The members of MERCY MALAYSIA mingle with the crowd to understand and assess their

needs. “We used their networks so that it was very much a local response” (Tam, 2014). They used this approach and rushed to deliver aid directly into Gaza and responded to the long-drawn conflict in Syria (Mercy Malaysia, 2014).

MERCY MALAYSIA has also been active in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This is considered by Dr. Jemilah as a “value partnership”, not just in terms of assistance but also for the development of human capital. There are over 10 corporations that are part of MERCY MALAYSIA’s programme and they are involved in relief and rehabilitation programmes (Chiew, 2007). The organisation has also established partnerships with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which looks after refugees and displaced persons and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) which focuses on gender issues and women’s reproductive health. The organization has been given special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Dr. Jemilah has been asked to serve in a number of international organisations. She was the Vice-Chair of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and served on the Board of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP) in Geneva. In 2008, she was appointed Co-Chair of the Global Humanitarian Platform. In 2014, she was appointed to head the World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) headquarters in New York. At the international level, she argued for equitable growth and inclusive development. She pleaded for all faith-based organizations to play a role in this area since in every emergency, in every conflict, communities rally around their faith. However, the faith-based organizations were divided among themselves. They must, therefore, unite to serve humanity, through dialogue, sharing knowledge and creating linkages. Similarly, civil societies are divided among themselves. They have been engaged in a narrow and institutionally defined way of dealing with humanitarian problems. They need to change the way they do things. They need to continue engaging and advocating with governments to: “Foster development processes that are inclusive, equal and just; Strengthen institutions supporting participatory governance; (and) Commit to a framework of mutual accountability at the global, regional and national level” (The Commonwealth, 2013). To achieve this agenda for transformation, civil society organisations should not split roles but work together; speak not just to events, but to change agents; negotiate not merely with friends but also with enemies.

In short, peace and stability is a long drawn out process. It requires individuals and organizations to work together and deal with the problem from a systemic perspective. Faith plays an important role in promoting peace and stability in the society. Serving the needs of the people is the cornerstone of many spiritual traditions. Faith-based organizations and civil societies must join hands to stop violence and to deal with the issues resulting from violence. To serve people, it is necessary to engage with friends and opponents in a way that respects their cultures and values, and builds trust and mutual respect.

### **Dr. Muhaya Hj Mohamad**

Dr. Muhaya Hj Mohamed is the Director and Consultant eye surgeon of Prof Muhaya Eye & Lasik Centre in Kajang, Malaysia. Previously she served as a Consultant Eye Surgeon and the Director of Eye and Lasik Centre, Prince Court Medical Centre (PCMC) and as a Professor of Ophthalmology at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. She was also an Adjunct Professor to the International Islamic University Malaysia. She is the Chairperson of the Ophthalmological Society, Malaysian Medical Association. Muhaya graduated from the medical school in 1985, obtained a Fellowship in Uveitis at Moorfields Eye Hospital, United Kingdom in 1998, and a PhD in Ocular Immunology from University of London in 1998. She also founded Prof Muhaya Mind Academy (PMMA) that has conducted seminars. She has authored sixteen books. In 2015, she received the Saidatina Khatija Special award from the Sultan of Selangor. She is married to Dr. Azmi Jamion and they have two daughters who are also doctors: Noor Aniah (Ophthalmology) and Noor Atiyah (Medical Doctor).

Committed to her profession as an ophthalmologist, she teaches general ophthalmology, Uveitis, medical retina and neuro-ophthalmology to undergraduate and postgraduate students at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Additionally, she is a regular motivational speaker to medical students in UKM, the International Islamic University Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and Cyberjaya University College of Medicine. She hosts a programme, Dr. Muhaya dot.com, in Alhijrah TV talk show that discusses issues of health holistically. She incorporates Islamic values into everyday life and her professional practice for which she is admirably called *ustāẓah* (a female Islamic teacher) (Muhaya Mohamad, 2009). In 2005, she was awarded the Special Distinguished Service Award by the Asia Pacific Academy of

Ophthalmology (APAO), Kuala Lumpur. She also received, in 2010, the Anugerah Tokoh Ilmuwan award for her contributions to society from the Selangor State Government (Foo, 2010: 5).

### **Religiosity**

Dr. Muhaya Mohamad comes from a religious family. Her father was very much concerned about the development of his children, their manners and their religiosity. Her mother was generous and she was keen on improving manners, virtues and morality of her children. She never missed her prayers and would always “remind me to pray.” She is humble: “I am not extremely pious but I take care of my prayers. I will pray wherever I am and ensure that I pray on time” (Rizniah Abd. Azib, 2013: 92). When it comes to religion, Muhaya is self-taught. She did not attend a religious school. During her primary school days, she memorized a few verses of the Qur’an. She began learning to read the Qur’an with the rules of pronunciation, and intonation at the age of 35 (Interview, January 12, 2016).

Dr. Muhaya wears modest Islamic dress with a head scarf not because of peer or parental pressure but because, according to Muhaya, it is required by religion. The *ġijġb* is a symbol of her commitment to Islamic way of life that she has chosen for herself. She argues that Muslim women should dress as required by Islam “despite the many challenges and the perceptions of various parties, including from those who looked down on women wearing headscarves.” She argues further that “there are no obstacles for Muslim women to be fashionable in clothing as long as they cover themselves and adhere to the requirements of the *shari’ah* (the Islamic law)” (Yayasan Dakwa Islam Malaysia, 2015). She has launched her own Muslimah fashion with trade mark, “Solat ready” i.e. “MODEST CULTURE INSPIRED BY PROF MUHAYA”, selling signature dresses for elegant professionals, mothers, and teens. These fashion dresses comply with *shari’ah* requirements and are so designed to allow ladies to pray without recourse to special clothing.

Muhaya takes Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as her role model because he had displayed the finest character. She wrote in her blog some attributes of good character such as: “suppressing anger for the sake of one’s ego, not vindicating or justifying oneself when in the wrong, hating oppressors and immoral, being gentle and humble with believers, being honest and decent in speech” (Prof. Dr Muhaya,

Facebook, 2014). In this way, she serves mankind “with integrity, empathy and the highest quality”.

She has been asked many times as to what inspires her to be so dedicated to serve humanity. Her answer was: (1) she is a servant of Allah (SWT); (2) she is a *Khalifah* (a vicegerent of Allah (SWT) on earth) and (3) she does things in conformity with the *shar'ah*, the divine law of Islam.

Whatever I do, I make sure it is in alignment with these 3 purposes. As a servant of Allah, we do not question Allah's order. As a Muslim, we have to love our Muslim brothers and sisters the way we love ourselves apart from loving non-Muslims. So in whatever I do, I like to treat others better than the way I want to be treated. In this act, I do things to the best of my ability in almost all circumstances. As a *khalifah*, I have to lead myself, my children and my organization as well as my community. In order to be a leader, I have to have certain qualities that will be exemplary in nature to those under me. In this contact, I try to lead by example (Prof. Dr Muhaya, Facebook, 2014).

Dr. Muhaya developed her passion for inspirational and motivational talks since she was young. She has impressed many and hence was appointed a “fellow of dakwah” for the Islamic Dakwah Foundation Malaysia (YADIM) in 2013. As an appreciation for her contributions to religion, the nation and the world, she was awarded “AnugerahPendakwahWanita 2014” (Women Preachers Award) by YADIM which carried a cash prize of RM15,000. The award was presented by Prime Minister Datuk Seri NajibRazak. She was offered the title “datuk” by two state governments and once by the federal government. She, however, refused to accept the title saying that it makes a person arrogant and ties a person to the state conferring the title. She would like to be free from encumbrance (Interview, January 12, 2016).

### **Philanthropy**

A successful ophthalmologist, Muhaya is active in many community organizations and has dedicated herself to making life better for other people. She treats her patients kindly and, when necessary, free of cost. She wrote about operating on a 60-year old ex-deputy headmaster of a school for free. She assumed that the deputy head master had made significant contributions to the society in addition to being an obedient servant of Allah (SWT) who spent his time learning the Qur'an

(Dr. Muhaya Mohamad, 2010). After so many successful cataract surgeries, she learnt that “Whenever someone is close to God and have been doing good deeds and contributing to others in one’s life time, he/she will be rewarded with the best solution for any problem that he/she might have” (Dr. Muhaya Mohamad, 2010). She is excited that Eye Lasik and Eye Centre, Prince Court Medical Centre, of which she was the Director, has charity funds for the unfortunate to seek treatment. She collected RM300,000 from Petronas, a Malaysian oil and gas company, for providing free treatment to the needy. Muhaya uses holistic approach in dealing with her patients by advising them to be grateful at every moment in their life and to pray five daily prayers without fail.

Dr. Muhaya believes that working in the medical field is the best way to serve mankind. A person concerned about the well-being of others will be better off in the medical profession. She cites a *Ādġth* (saying) of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) which encourages the performance of five things one of which is to relieve the suffering of others. Doctors are in a better position to help people who are suffering mentally or physically. A doctor does not need an office or an organization to serve. He/she is useful anytime, anywhere and to anybody. However, she advises those aspiring to become a doctor, to heal oneself physically, spiritually, emotionally and socially. According to her, a Muslim doctor should have spiritual purity before being able to treat patients. To that effect, she wrote a book *How to Become a Good and Successful Medical Student: A Holistic approach* (2012).

Dr. Muhaya has also been promoting education. She has been actively campaigning in schools and colleges encouraging students to learn so that they could contribute to the development of society. She has also been generous financially helping students in need. In 2010, Muhaya received the Anugerah Tokoh Ilmuwan award from the Selangor State Government which came with a cash prize of RM 10,000. Muhaya immediately decided to donate the money to a fund to help students who could not pay their fees as well as deserving single mothers. Selangor executive councillor Dr Halimah Ali said Dr Muhaya was a role model for others in the society (Foo, 2010: 5).

Muhayais concerned with teachers who impart knowledge to young minds. The role of the responsible teacher is not merely to impart knowledge but also to set good examples to adolescents. It is an extra sensitive role which needs to be clearly understood. Therefore, it takes more than a certificate to be an effective

teacher. A teacher must be physically sound, mentally alert, spiritually connected to the Lord of the universe and must be adept at inter-personal communication. He/she must treat children equally; strive to increase the self-esteem among the students; and plant positive thought. Teachers with character have the wisdom to distinguish right from wrong, are honest and trustworthy, respectful and responsible, and are committed to living a moral life.

In terms of education, Muhaya would like to see students healthy and “eat consciously.” She approves Joel Fuhrman’s book *Eat to Live* which she says is Islamic. People should eliminate fats and starches and concentrate on eating greens, beans and fruit. They should eat plant-based food with little meat. She, therefore, developed the tag-line “reset dapur” or reset the kitchen.

Dr. Muhaya has been involved in a number of charity-related events. She has organized and taken parts in many charity talks, open houses, and has launched her own charity funds. She uses the honoraria she receives for her talks and the cash money that comes with various awards for the benefit of the poor and the needy and for children’s welfare. She gives part of her earnings to the poor sections of society on a regular basis. She would not like these charities to be made public as it would go against the Islamic teachings of giving charity in secret, in a way that the left hand should not know what the right is giving.

### **Peace through religion**

Dr. Muhaya believes in employing religious sources for building peace and nonviolence. Religious involvement in peace-making initiatives can equip peace activists, diplomats and victims with proactive roles in transforming conflict. Religion can bring social, moral, and spiritual resources to the peace-building processes. Religious commitment has been found to be strongly associated with impetus for engaging in peace-building activities and bringing about peaceful social transformation. Religion provides spiritual bases for transformation and offers rich resources for resolving conflicts by advocating values such as repentance, forgiveness, justice and patience, and the like. If used consistently, these values could promote peace as they emphasise common humanity, and encourage co-existence.

What is true of Islam, Muhaya argues, is true of other religions. Muslims must respect people of other religions since the Qur’an requires Muslims to deal

gently with people of other faiths arguing that they have the right to their own faith (“To you, your religion, and to me mine,” al-Qur’an, 109: 6). Every religion, she said, upholds certain basic human values, such as love, compassion, peace and a concern for the poor and the marginalized. Muslims must seek to build bridges with others on the basis of values that they hold in common, and, in accordance with the Prophetic example, work along with them for the establishment of a more just, prosperous and peaceful society. In the process, Muslims will be able to convince others that Islam has viable solutions to the problems affecting society at large. This is what Muhaya calls *da’wah* (lit. invitation) or spreading the message of Islam. She told this author, “I believe in *da’wah*. My mission in life is to be the ambassador of Islam.”

Dr. Muhaya has been engaged in promoting peace by reaching out to the community through lectures, speeches, workshops and other social activities. MuhayaMohamad has her own blog ([dr.muhaya.blogspot.com](http://dr.muhaya.blogspot.com)) Facebook and Twitter in order to communicate with the community. She appears on radio IKIM, TV1 and TV2 frequently. She is often invited by the local mass media to speak about eye diseases and has a regular column on eye care in the *Utusan Malaysia*. She is also a columnist for many Islamic magazines and newspapers like *Mingguan Malaysia*, *IMAN*, *Qn A*, and *Al-ustaz*. Additionally, she has produced her own show in Astro Oasis named “Reset minda” (Reset Mind) and “Mata kehati” (Eyes to Heart). Her belief is that “to have a peaceful world we need to have many people with inner peace” (Prof. Dr Muhaya, 2013).

Dr. Muhaya believes that the highest peace of mind can be attained by: maintaining high integrity; treating others better than the way one would like to be treated by others; and by “going the extra mile,” that is, doing more than what is required. Hence to have a good life and peace of mind, it is necessary to develop goodness in one’s heart and “start giving love and kindness, peace and joy” to others. There is a need to maintain a positive attitude to life and to be grateful to the Creator, the Sustainer of the universe.

Dr. Muhaya stresses the need to implant solidly the principle of *‘aqidah* in the heart and mind of Muslims and only then they will be at peace with themselves. People, both Muslims and non-Muslims, tend to focus on “extrinsic motivation” i.e., to be rich, famous, beautiful, respected and obeyed. “These are the sources of stress and are resistant to peace”. She laments that the prevalent educational system produce individuals whose focus is on three “As”: Acquisition

of wealth, Approval of others and Achievement in terms of grades and jobs. The focus should be on '*aqidah*. If a person tries sincerely to please Allah (SWT), he/she will simultaneously be pleasing fellow creatures. The Prophet (SAW) was gentle, loving, approachable, compassionate, and respectful towards others and always willing to serve humanity. Accepting him as a role model will ensure peace and prosperity for all. If Muslims were to abide faithfully to the teachings of Islam in their personal lives and social dealings, she argues, they would be rewarded by God, and not only would their manifold problems be resolved, but they would also ensure positive peace in the world. Muhaya came up with the idea of "reset minda" or resetting the mind. This means to delete old ways of thinking and doing things. Start afresh and think positively. Her emphasis is on the mind which determines what one thinks and the latter, in turn, determines actions that produces results affecting oneself and others around. Muhaya suggests that people must turn to internal reform rather than seeking external solutions to their problems.

Dr. Muhaya is a motivational speaker and has many followers because of her charisma as a public speaker, expertise and her audience friendly approach in her presentations. It is erroneously assumed that she is popular only among females. A survey of 33 Malay male between the ages of 25 and 34 were conducted to examine the attitude of male audience towards female speakers from the cognitive, affective and behavioural perspectives. Generally male respondents prefer male speakers. They think that male speakers can do better than female speakers; feel that it would be worth listening to male speakers and that they would not pay much attention to female speakers. Overall, they have a negative attitude towards female motivational speakers (average mean= 2.63). However, their attitude towards Dr. Muhaya was positive. The respondents trust her (mean=3.30), think of her as a credible speaker (mean=3.55), and would be willing to listen to her advice (average mean=3.42). In short, the study found her to be a credible motivational speaker and a credible source for motivational discussion (Mohd Hilmi Bakar & Rosni Jaafar, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

Muslim women in Malaysia have been active in the public and private domains. They enjoyed property and inheritance rights and a degree of freedom to work.

Their education was largely religious. Some social organisations in the pre-independence era extolled the virtues of formal education for women. Though limited and specific in objectives, the expansion of schooling in colonial Malaya also resulted in the entry of women into the teaching profession. Despite low numbers, Muslim women took part in the struggle for independence against British colonial rule. Since independence, Malay women have been working in educational establishments, hospitals and municipalities. Given the positive steps taken by the government in the areas of education, employment and equity ownership, the status of women has improved significantly making up about 47 per cent of the labour force.

Malays, as defined by the Constitution, are Muslims. Since Islam is rooted in the culture of the Malays, it became a source of moral and spiritual guidance for a lot of Malaysian women. One visible symbol of Islam in Malaysia is Muslim women's dress. Muslim women can be seen donning the veil or *tudung* which covers their hair and the chest, leaving only the face visible. They are concerned about the welfare of their kith and kin and the needy. Employed or not, most Muslim women take part in philanthropic activities according to their means. Several studies have shown that Muslim women are actively involved in joint action, advocacy and lobbying of issues pertaining to women, development and justice. While aware of their ethnic and religious identity, Muslim women have embraced the concept of "unity in diversity." Women's organisation associated with UMNO, Wanita UMNO, as well as others profess to be striving for justice at all levels of society while adhering to the principles of Islam. They aim at creating a progressive and innovative nation and at maintaining national peace and stability through the creation of a just and fair society.

The generalizations made above concerning Malaysian Muslim women are beautifully and forcefully presented by Drs. Jamilah Mahmood and Muhaya Mohamad. One is a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist and the other is an ophthalmologist and a motivational speaker. They take Islam seriously, take part in philanthropic activities regularly, and strive for peace in the world individually as well as in association with others. They have shown a myriad ways in which Muslim women can and do contribute to the building of peace.

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