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Marina's magic

Getting UN recognition after years of activism makes her want to do even more.

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SEVERAL months ago, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir received a call from the United Nations office in Malaysia telling her that it was giving out an award.

"When they called, I was gearing up to be asked to be a judge or something. Then they told me that they would like to recognise me for the work I had done (as an activist). It was a nice surprise, but I told them unfortunately I would not be in town to receive it!" she says in an interview at her office in Kuala Lumpur.

Marina (pic) has been named United Nations in Malaysia's Person of the Year 2010. In a recent news report, UN resident coordinator Kamal Malhotra said she was chosen because she had always been a prominent campaigner for women's rights, and had been at the forefront of efforts to put AIDS on the public agenda in the country.

The move to honour a UN Person/Organisation of the Year in Malaysia was initiated in 1998 by the United Nations country team to acknowledge the work of individuals/organisations seen as upholding the ideals of that organisation.

Besides Marina, the other nominees for this year are Dr Hartini Zainudin (general manager of Nur Salam), Roslan Hamzah (who is with PT Foundation), the Women's Centre for Change, and Suaram.

Marina served as president of the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC), an umbrella of 40 non-governmental organisations working on HIV/AIDS in the country, from 1993 to 2005. Currently, she is a board member of Sisters in Islam (SIS), an advocacy group which champions justice and equality for Muslim women.

Marina missed the UN award presentation ceremony as she was representing SIS at the 7th East-West

Dialogue on Gender Equality and Development in Barcelona. Her daughters Ineza Roussille, 23, and Shaista Mayada Sosrowardoyo, 11, accepted the trophy and certificate in KL on her behalf. Her husband, Tara Sosrowardoyo, texted her in Spain, saying that the girls thought "it was an interesting experience".

Surprisingly, Marina's parents, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, were unaware that she had been honoured. "My mum sent me a phone message the next day after one of her friends told her!" she says.

"It's gratifying to be recognised. However, there are so many people doing a lot of good work in Malaysia. I always believe that when you win an award it's not because you worked alone. I had the support of all the people at MAC and SIS."

Not one to have her head in the clouds, she notes that "it's nice for a couple of days when people acknowledge the fact with congratulatory messages and it's all very lovely, but you come back to the same problems."

In all her years as an activist, she adds, "the toughest thing was really for people to take both the issues and myself, seriously."

HIV/AIDS is especially tough because when MAC first started in 1992, there was not much research to prove that it was a threat to society.

"Being the PM's daughter at that time, people thought I had fund-raising abilities and could bring attention to the cause," she recalls.

"People didn't know me well then and I made it a point to learn as much as I could. I had to do a lot of reading and research. It actually suited me very well because it is such a multi-faceted subject and I wasn't bored."

"The most rewarding thing for me was putting treatment for HIV/AIDS patients on the table and getting the government to agree to provide antiviral treatment for Malaysians living with HIV, for free," she says.

"I hope we get to the point where we are 'AIDS accepting' and we accept that we are not doing enough or are still queasy about the topic. People still have to deal with the stigma."

In her current role, she helps SIS with strategic thinking and communications with the media and public.

"SIS assists women on issues with the Syariah court – we have a strong legal aid department. In fact, we are doing a study on the massive impact of polygamy. Some results are already out and SIS is producing a book, in collaboration with UKM and USM, which will be out next year."

Marina also writes a long-running fortnightly column, *Musings*, in *The Star*, produces TV programmes for young women, writes and speaks regularly on women's issues, particularly where they relate to Islam, gender and HIV/AIDS.

She admits that she really enjoys it all! She describes bliss as a day when she does not have to go out for meetings all day and has time to sit in front of her computer and catch up on her reading and writing.

Marina, who has 2,000 followers on Twitter, believes that social media tools are a very important means of communication.

"Twitter is great as it's quick. I read all my news through this and can carry on 15 conversations at a time! While Facebook only allows one topic at a time, it is a tool for me to write about certain topics that I feel will help educate people."

"I am terrible as I'm connected all the time. That is why I answer my e-mails very quickly. My resolution this year was to wake up and wait at least 10 minutes before looking at my tweets. I've been pretty good!" she says with a laugh.

"I have this amazing life ... I get to meet Hillary Clinton one day and Shah Rukh Khan the next. But, when I go back to the office, reality sets in ... I have bills to pay, birthday parties to organise, issues to handle and all the things people normally do, and people don't see that!"

Not surprising that people have misconceptions about her, the most common being that she can get anything done easily because of her "connections".

"It's not true. Even if I had connections, it is such a horrible way to do things. The way I was brought up, I don't believe in making use of these connections for business or anything, unless it is for some social cause."

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In a November 2002 interview with *World Press Review* – an independent, non-partisan New York-based online magazine - on the spread of AIDS in Asia, Marina was reported as saying that she had to wait eight months to get an appointment to see her father, the PM then, to do a presentation on HIV in Malaysia, in her capacity as MAC president.

Following that, the report continued, she and her colleagues had to brush up on their knowledge of economic and social impact issues, and costs, as she knew that if they could not answer all of Dr Mahathir's questions, their whole argument would fall to pieces!

While Marina offers her appreciation to the UN in Malaysia for her award, she quips, "I hope I live up to it, and I'm not like Barack Obama! (Obama received the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize after less than nine months in office.) With her track record and commitment to social causes, Marina need not worry.

"I think there are a lot of people doing fantastic work in this country and they go unrecognised. However, having such awards is great as when people are recognised, it offers a huge

amount of encouragement for the work they are doing," she concludes.

