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EXCLUSIVE

# A WOMAN OF STRENGTH

As the daughter of a country's longest-serving prime minister, Marina Mahathir is no stranger to us. In an exclusive with MillionaireAsia, Marina opens up on matters closest to her heart and tells us what Marina really thinks.

BY GRACE LAI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KID CHAN



“I DON'T WANT TO BE BITTER, LIVING IN EXILE, CRITICISING FROM AFAR. I THINK THAT THOSE WHO STAY AND FIGHT, AND SUFFER - THEY HAVE MORE CREDIBILITY.”

There are some people that, when you are in their presence, you can't help but be in total awe. You stand a little taller, you lower your voice a notch and you, by and large, just feel a little better, as if your entire being understands that there is someone extraordinary present.

Being a Malaysian, the name Marina Mahathir is as familiar as the next door neighbour, perhaps even more so because Datin Paduka Marina is not only the daughter and eldest child of Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister (22 years), Marina is also an outspoken commentator on Malaysia's social and political affairs, a journalist, public relations practitioner, television producer and a women's rights and HIV/AIDS activist. In 2010, Marina was also named UN Person of the Year by the United Nations in Malaysia.

A woman whose only fear is that of being stuck in a rut of her own, Marina challenges herself from time to time. “Every few years, I feel the need to do something that scares me. Not something scary per se, but something that scares me personally.” For her 50th birthday, Marina climbed Mount Kinabalu, the tallest mountain in South East Asia and for another, she went through a strenuous boot camp in Spain and Scotland and for the year of 2013, this determined lady plans to organise an all-women's run - despite having never been a runner.

### **Tell us about your childhood and growing up a part of the Mahathir family.**

I would say it was a pretty normal family. What many people don't realise is that my dad was only elected as prime minister when I was in my mid 20s, so my childhood was pretty normal, like any other Malay family at that time. I grew up in Alor Setar and the only unusual thing about me was that I had two working parents. Dad was the first Malay private doctor in Alor Setar at that time so he was rather well known in town but that was it. We lived in government quarters because my mum was working for the government then and had large compounds to play in. I had a really idyllic childhood.

And then I went to a boarding school in Seremban - Tengku Kurshiah. It was a very tough school, open only to Malay girls. In fact I remember that due to the very strict entry requirements, only three of us in my batch passed the test for admission. It was good in many ways though because up until I went there, I didn't know Malay girls could be so clever. Mind you, I wasn't a poor student but over there, everybody had 7As and the bar was so much higher. It was a totally different ball game. I got to see different views of people and what they are capable of, the diversity within the Malay community. Although we shared the same heritage, they were completely different. Boarding school really taught me to be tolerant. You learn not only about diversity but also about putting up with different people.

**At what age did you realise what you wanted to do, discovered your voice, so to speak?**

Very late actually. Since I was young, I have loved the English language. I knew I could write and that was what I wanted to do so I pursued journalism. When I got back, I got a job writing with a magazine and honestly, it was a little anti-climactic. Because, it was all “quite easy”. I wanted to pursue writing and I did it and I thought to myself, surely there must be more to it.

I was interested in social issues but when you are young, you don’t really have time to go into it because you’re busy being a young adult, doing the usual things. It was only in my 30s, after I got married, had my first child and returned to Malaysia that I started to move into what I’m doing now. At that time, I was offered my column with The Star (Malaysia’s leading daily) and that’s when I started doing things and it just went from there. That was in 1989.

**Were you encouraged by your dad in all these?**

No, not at all. My parents only ever pushed me and my siblings towards finishing our education. We had to finish university and that was all they asked. They were both exemplary figures though. We always saw them doing voluntary work and getting involved with the community and that sort of thing seeps in.

**What would you say was a pivotal moment in your life?**

It was the moment when I said I would join the AIDS council, back in 1993. But at that time, as far as everyone was concerned, I joined because I had some experience in fund raising. And being the prime minister’s daughter, there was some credibility to it yet I would definitely say that I would not be who I am today without my work at the AIDS council. I owe nearly everything I know to that.

However, it was really an unconscious move. I didn’t know that it would be what it turned out to be. I was plunged into a world I didn’t know about and had no experience in but, what I learnt and saw from my time with the AIDS council truly shaped me into what I believe in, and what I do today.

*\*Marina served as president of the Malaysian AIDS Council for 12 years from 1993–2005.*

**What would you say is your greatest accomplishment?**

My greatest accomplishment would be when we succeeded in getting free treatment for AIDS in the government hospitals. At that time, this was really unheard of and the day they (government hospital officials) said they would do that, give free treatment for AIDS - that was really meaningful to me.

Mostly, I think my accomplishments are those I achieved through someone else. In that, I mean for example, the first time a prime minister shook hands with someone HIV positive. AIDS is so much more than a medical issue. There are the social conditions that helped the virus spread, methods and ways we as a community can help prevent it, human rights issue and etc. It is a really multi-faceted topic.

**What are your core beliefs?**

I believe that we must try to convince women that their lives are worth protecting. (Marina is a very active advocate of women’s rights)

If you believe that the law is for justice, then you ask, is that particular law just? If it’s not, then should we still keep to it blindly? People shouldn’t have less just because they are different. Human rights is a basic rule and everybody, no matter their gender, sexuality or political and religious belief, should be accorded that right.

**As a mother, what do you want to leave as a legacy to your children?**

I just want them to be good people I think (Marina laughs). I hope they will contribute to society and I think I just want them to be a positive influence in the community. I’m definitely not a “tiger mother”. I’m quite relaxed. My children know what I do and they have always been exposed to different ideas, concepts and cultures since a very young age. I do not impose any particular type of thinking on them. They love to read - that I’m very happy about.

**What would you like to see in our society? What are you doing to change that?**

I’d like to see more rationality in the country. People are getting more and more carried away with a lot of nonsense. We get so caught up with irrational ideas about how people should be, or how they should not be.

I have the platform to speak out, but not necessarily the power or the resources, as most people assume I have. And really, I shouldn’t be the only one speaking out or doing something about our society. Malaysians have this idea that certain people should do this and that, bring change and make things happen but that should not be the way. The power is in the people’s voice. That’s where the real power should be. We have a tendency to put everything on one person and that is not sustainable. It is not democratic.

We should develop a sense of perspective as a nation. Is our country safe? (Touching on the topic of safety in the

city). Well, if you compare it to countries like Buenos Aires in Argentina and South Africa where people pull out guns in the middle of a supermarket or street, yes, our country is not as dangerous. But having said that, if the people of a country do not feel safe in their own country, it is definitely an issue that needs to be addressed and dealt with.

**With the concern of so many young people leaving the country out of dissatisfaction with the way things are, would you do the same?**

As a mother, yes I do want my daughter, my children, to grow up in a place where they feel safe in. But then, I remember, in 1995, I attended the Beijing Women’s Conference and there, I saw a group of Iranian women exiles who had left Iran and gone to live in America. They were strident and really bitter about everything and there and then, I thought to myself - I don’t want to be like that.

I don’t want to be bitter, living in exile, criticising from afar. I think that those who stay and fight, and suffer - they have more credibility.

Stay and fight. That’s what I’ll choose.

**What do you think of the potential of Malaysia and Malaysians?**

I have a lot of hope for young Malaysians. They are creative and they don’t wait, they just do. They are doing a lot of interesting things. Hopefully, they won’t feel defeated. I hope their dreams will not be crushed by bureaucracy and what they think stand in their way.

Everyone should realise that they have the power to change things. They can do that by voicing out. Again, I’m repeating, but we rely too much on too few people to do things. It’s just not sustainable so add your voice to a cause and build on the movement. That’s how change will happen and I believe it will. ▲

*For more on Marina, check out Marina Mahathir’s latest book - Telling It Straight, published by Editions Didier Millet, available in all major bookstores.*

