

Halimah Yacob: Lady of Substance



The Independent file photo

On 14th September 2017, Halima bint Yacob (born 23 August 1954) became the first woman president of the Republic of Singapore.

Halima is of paternal Indian and maternal Malay descent. Her life trajectory proves that with courage, grit, the right attitude, and humility one can overcome adversity and deprivation to achieve the highest office. Her father, a watchman in a government job, died when she, the youngest of five children, was only eight years old. Her mother, to make two ends meet, started selling snacks on a pushcart, and Halimah used to help her in preparing the ingredients. Things got worse when the family was thrown out of the government quarter, and they had to stay with relatives. In the early years of school, Halimah recalls that she hardly paid attention to studies – as she was exhausted and sleepy and also prone to daydreaming. But soon the realization dawned that if she wanted to help lessen her mother's burden, she would have to pay attention to her studies. After her schooling at Singapore Chinese Girls school and Tanjong Katong Girls school,

she proceeded to the then University of Singapore on a Macquarie University International scholarship graduating with a law degree in 1978. She was called to the bar in 1981 and conferred a Masters of law degree at National University of Singapore (NUS) 2001.

She started her career as the legal officer at National Trade Union Congress and became the director of the legal services department in 1992. She was appointed as Director of the Singapore Institute of Labor Studies in 1999.

She entered politics in 2001 and was elected as MP for Jurong Group Representation Constituency (GRC). After the 2011 election, she was made Minister of Community Development, Youth, and Sports. In a cabinet reshuffle in the following year, she got the portfolio of Minister of Social and Family Welfare. In January 2013, she became the first Woman in Singapore's history to be elected to the post of Speaker. In 2015 she was co-opted into the People's Action Party (PAP) Central Executive Board, the highest decision-making body in Singapore.

Through her long public service, she has been a strong advocate for rights for women and Muslims. As an activist, she fought for equal medical benefits for female civil servants. As a unionist, she upheld social issues which affect less skilled workers, elderly and the mentally ill. She has been trying to find ways to help educate children from low-income families. Her welfare concerns include finding ways to educate children from low-income groups by setting up tuition centers. She has also taken up weekly distribution of food packets to the needy. Halimah is known to apply the human touch to all her activities. During the Zika Virus, she visited the affected in their homes and hospitals.

Her public services have won accolades and several awards. She won the Berita Harian /Macdonald's Achiever's Award of the Year in 2001 and Her World Magazine "Women of the Year" in 2004 for her contribution to society, the AWARE Heroine Award 2011.

In 2014 she was inducted into the Singapore Council of Women's Organization's **Singapore's Women's Hall of Fame**.

In the year 2016, she was conferred the Honorary Degree of Law by NUS in recognition of her services to the PAP for three decades. It is the highest form of recognition for an individual who had an impact on communities and NUS.

Exemplary in her behavior, exceedingly conscious of time, compassionate in her outlook she is humble and unassuming. She continues to live in public housing with her husband and five children. Her greatest regret and sorrow is she was not with her mother when she died in the hospital aged 90 when Halimah was out campaigning.

A hijab-wearing Halimah Yacob has demonstrated to the world that it is possible for a Muslim woman to achieve success through the dint of merit and hard work in a non-Muslim, secular country. She is an inspiration for millions of women especially Muslim women.