



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

# Tun Dr Siti Hasmah

Wife of the fourth Malaysian prime minister, 90

Interview by **Shermian Lim**  
 Photograph by **Delvin Xian**

**We are very grateful to our parents** because they didn't discriminate between genders with education. All of us, three girls and seven boys, were sent to be educated equally. My father gave himself as a very good model for education. He used to say, "If I give education to a son, I'm educating an individual, but if I give education to a daughter, I'm educating a nation."

**My family shifted to KL from Klang** when I was three years old. We stayed in government quarters and the first house in KL we stayed in was on Travers Road, which has now been taken over by KL Sentral. It was a double storey house and most of our neighbours were Indians.

**There were two people that we children were afraid of** at the time. The first was the health inspector, because he went from house to house to check whether children were being vaccinated against small pox. Whenever we saw the inspector coming, we would run to hide. The other person we were so afraid of was the policeman who accompanied the health inspector. The way he looked, with his beard, and the way he carried himself must have frightened us.

**There were no clubs and societies** when I was in school, but we did a lot of reading, and I played badminton. I was in charge of the class library so I got all the new English books first to index and label them. I was also fond of writing.

**I was 15 in 1941** during the Japanese occupation. The Japanese schools came up, but I refused to go to school. Only my younger brothers went to school. My sisters and I stayed home. My mother said, "Now is the time for you to learn housekeeping."

**Why smoke?** You are planting the seed of cancer in your lungs.

**I am the third Malay woman** to become a doctor in the country. Kuala

Lumpur Hospital was very different when I was in charge of the children's ward. It was a long ward with big wooden flapping doors. There were 18 beds on the left and 18 beds on the right full of children with diphtheria and tuberculosis.

**With diphtheria**, the bacterium covers the whole of the throat and the air pipe, causing the child to turn blue. One of the senior doctors told me to learn quickly, as this was a life or death situation—wrap the child in a towel, place him or her on the table and stretch his or her neck out to feel for the trachea; find it and just stab and twist with a scalpel to open up an air hole. The child would splutter and if you didn't wear a mask, you'd get all the muck on your face.

**One of my postings** was in Kedah. There, villagers were scared to go to hospitals because those who went seemed to end up dying. That's because they took too long to come. In the rural areas, if a pregnant woman experienced trouble during childbirth, she needed the permission of her parents, the midwife and the head of the village just to visit the hospital. Then there was the issue of transport. In one case, two villagers had to carry a woman in a cradle from her house to the roadside to wait for a car. Some rural areas didn't even have roads before Tun Razak opened up access.

**What men should know about child-bearing** is that he is responsible also, *kan?* Now that husbands can enter the labour room, he should see what she goes through in delivering their baby. Some are too scared of blood, some are too scared of this or scared of that. I would tell them, "Nonsense! You come and see."

**Even though it was only for a short time**, I'm proud that Mahathir initiated the policy of the sciences being

taught in English. So many new developments are happening in the health sciences and it's all in English. Of course you can translate, but who will do the translation? You need someone who is not only fluent in Bahasa and English, but also proficient in the subjects. Which physics professor is going to spend all day doing translations?

**One of the things that I had to do** as a prime minister's wife was to entertain the wives of foreign dignitaries. If they were from developing countries that regarded us as having developed more than them, they would want to know how we do things. I always told myself (and my friends) to be humble when we spoke. I would thank them for wanting to know, and start the conversation with, "We began just like you."

**I took a play-by ear course for organ** in USJ. I didn't tell the teacher who I was; I just went to the studio. I passed my preliminary and intermediate levels with them but we had to perform in a courtyard during the certificate presentation. Young students had their parents attend the concert; I brought my husband.

**Our family gatherings** are wonderful, especially on the first day of Raya. The whole family goes to the mosque, and then visits the palace or the prime minister's house before going home for the family meal. The sitting room is arranged for the family to greet each other. My husband will be in his chair, and I am next to him, ready with the *angpow lah!* Being the eldest, Marina comes first to give respect and seek forgiveness before she takes her place beside me. But the adults don't get *angpow*; the grandchildren, the friends and the house staff do.

**I am still wondering** why I am being interviewed by a men's magazine like Esquire. 📌