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# Saleha's life of charitable deeds

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ANY Malaysians today know her only as Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's sister-in-law—Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali's elder sister—but to remember Tan Sri Saleha Mohd Ali solely by that relationship would be an injustice.

For the grand dame had lived a long and fruitful life in the service of the country, working tirelessly, compassionately, humbly, and sincerely to better the plight of the less fortunate.

To those who had the privilege of knowing her, her name would always be synonymous with welfare and charitable deeds.

"She was a caring person who is ever willing to go out of her way to help others, with a touching sense of humility and compassion.

"I think that will be how she will always be remembered," says the chief executive of the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli), Datuk Michael Yeoh.

Yeoh had worked closely with Saleha, who was an adviser to Asli, for the past 35 years.

Born in Klang, Saleha was educated at St Mary's in Kuala Lumpur and trained to be a teacher.

But in an age when women's roles were confined to being housewives and mothers, Saleha became one of the first two Malay women to go to the London School of Economics to further her studies after the Japanese occupation in the 1940s.

Saleha returned with a Certificate in Social Science to join the government as an officer in the Welfare Department.

The same year, she became the first Malayan social worker to be posted as director of the Selangor Welfare Department.

When the cry for independence swept across the country, Saleha was among the first few women to answer its call and got involved in helping Datuk Onn Jaafar, Umno's founding president, form the party in the late 1940s.

She was also one of the founding members of the Kaum Ibu Umno (now Wanita Umno), which paved the way for the equal participation of women in Malaysia's socio-politics today.

Saleha was instrumental in setting up the Scouts and Red Cross movements in Malaysia, and the National Council of Women's Organisations. She also helped establish the country's Juvenile Court.

She held numerous positions in a myriad of welfare, social and educational organisations, including being on the board of the United Nations Association of Malaysia, the Malaysian Liver Foundation, the Malaysian Federation for the Deaf, and HELP University College.

At the time of her death on Monday, she was also the patron of the Universal Peace Federation.

Saleha's life story and the numerous commitments that made up her contribution to society seemed chartered in equal parts by her passion for charity and for learning, with the latter probably having been cultivated by her father's high regard for education.



Tan Sri Saleha Mohd Ali giving out presents to underprivileged children of the Ozanam Orphanage and the Guru Dharma Society at a HELP Institute Christmas celebration in 1996.

## Tan Sri Saleha Mohd Ali

Saleha was the third child of thirteen siblings and the eldest daughter of Mohd Ali Taib and Siti Khadijah Ahmad.

**Born:** Jan 29, 1923

**Died:** March 21, 2011; aged 88

**Place of birth:** Klang, Selangor

**Spouse:** Mohd Zain Ahmad

**Children:** Zahedi, Zabidi, Zahari

### Education:

- Certificate in Social Science, London School of Economics
- Awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Queensland for her contributions to education

### Career:

- 1940-1942: Teacher, Pasar Road English School.
- 1945-1946: Officer, Selangor Welfare Department
- 1949-1953: Officer, Malacca Welfare Department
- 1945: Secretary, Kuala Lumpur Kaum Ibu (Wanita Umno)
- 1951: Vice-president, Kaum Ibu Umno
- 1950-1952: Selangor Legislative Council member. Saleha was the first woman legislator of the council.

A firm believer in life-long learning, she had gone back to read law in Universiti Malaya when she was 50, but her academic ambitions were curtailed when her husband fell ill and passed away.

But she never gave up on wanting to improve herself, to gain new

knowledge.

"She was always looking for ways to better herself. Up until two, three years ago, she was actively participating in many seminars. She was easily the oldest person in any conference," said Yeoh.

Although she hobnobbed with



Saleha also held positions in many social, welfare and charitable organisations. Among them:

- Chairman, School for the Deaf, Selangor
- Chairman, Handicapped and Spastic Children Association
- Chairman, Sang Kancil Organisation Social Services
- Patron, Women's Federation for World Peace
- Adviser, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Society for the Deaf
- Chairman, Association for Disability Advancement
- Trustee, Malaysian Liver Foundation
- Chairman, Muslim Women's Welfare Council
- Chairman, Young Muslim Women Organisation, Selangor
- Chairman, Spastic Children's Association of Selangor and Federal Territory
- Chancellor and executive chairman of HELP University College
- Adviser, Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute

many of the world's rich and famous, like Nelson Mandela — who called her *kakak* — the Dalai Lama, and F1 racer Michael Schumacher, Saleha appreciated her friendships with ordinary folk no less, living closely by one of her now famous quote: "To be a leader, you have to learn first. Be

humble and work hard."

To close friends like HELP University College president Datuk Dr Paul Chan, Saleha was "the epitome of what a Malaysian should, and can be".

"She could mix comfortably with the rich and powerful, the poor and disadvantaged, of any race, religion, culture, and political leaning. She was discerning, but not discriminatory. This is her legacy: a model of what a Malaysian should be — inclusive and embracing."

Warm and caring on the outside, Saleha also had a will of steel and an inspiring zest for life that was evident when she overcame not one, but three different cancers — a brain tumour in 1991, breast cancer in 1994, and in 2001, she wrestled with a gastrointestinal stromal tumour (a growth in the intestinal tract).

She was diagnosed with a fourth cancer — uterine cancer — in 2005, but she lost this final battle.

Yet, Saleha always knew she had been blessed with "extra life" as she once called it, and had always thought her later years were meant to be lived helping others.

"She was a very strong woman. She had great fighting spirit and always recovered (from her previous illnesses). She believed she always had more work to do," said her eldest son, Zahedi Mohd Zain.

Her niece Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, said if anyone thought she was a strong woman, it was because she came from a family of strong women, beginning with her aunt Saleha.

"She had a will that was indomitable and was never shy about giving an opinion.

"But underneath, she had a kind heart and loved her family more than anything."