

For Review Only

## The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking

Cookbook author, entrepreneur and media personality Rita Zahara follows up her bestselling title *Malay Heritage Cooking* with another exciting treasury of dishes deeply rooted in Malay culture and history.

In *The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking*, Rita assembles a stunning collection of authentic dishes that hail from various Malay ethnic groups. She presents the richness and diversity of Nusantara cuisine with recipes from her family and notable contributors that include highly regarded chefs, Mdm Asmah Laili and Chef Amri Azim, and established restaurants Sabar Menanti, Warong Nasi Pariaman, Hjh Maimunah Restaurant and Mamanda.

Recipes include sumptuous staples and traditional favourites such as *ayam penyet* (grilled chicken rice), *opor daging* (beef in coconut sauce) and *sambal udang* (spicy prawns) as well as crowd-pleasing snacks and delicacies including *kuih bingka suji* (baked tapioca cake), *puteri seri muka* (glutinous rice with pandan jam) and *pulut serunding* (grilled rice cakes with grated coconut).

Written with clear and easy-to-follow instructions, the recipes in *The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking* have been rigorously kitchen-tested and will inspire home cooks to incorporate the winning combination of herbs and spices so closely associated with Malay cuisine into their cooking repertoire.

*“Food is only food if it is prepared with love.  
And it is with this love that I hope to preserve and document  
our cultural and culinary heritage  
so that we always remember who we are.”*

Rita Zahara

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Rita Zahara

The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking

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## The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking

Rita Zahara





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## *The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking*

*Rita Zahara*

*Foreword by*  
Associate Professor Fatimah Abdul Lateef

 **Marshall Cavendish**  
Cuisine



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## Dedication

As this book was about to go to print, my family and I received bad news about my dad's health. Doctors diagnosed him with 4th stage cancer. While his fight is tough, he is not alone. God made us go through tough times, knowing we are strong enough to face tough situations. And so we shall, as a family. That's what my late mother, Hajjah Zabidah would want us to do. When my first book, *Malay Heritage Cooking* was launched in 2012, the book was made in memory of her. Today, this book is written as a tribute to my dad, **Haji Mohamed Nazeer Alal Mohamed Russull**.

To my father, **Haji Mohamed Nazeer Alal Mohamed Russull**, this book is dedicated to you. You and mom are always our guiding light. You committed your lives to nurturing us and for that we are eternally grateful.

This book is also lovingly dedicated in memory of my grandparents, **Alal Mohamed Russull** and **Che Zahara Noor Mohamed**. They devoted a major part of their lives to Singapore and the community. They had tremendous courage and I am grateful for the legacy they have left behind. In 2014, Che Zahara was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame.

For the strong support system in my life, **Mohd Syed Jamal Alhadi**, my children, **Syed Muhammad Luqman Jamal Alhadi** and **Sharifah Nadhrah Jamal Alhadi**, this book is for you too. Your love and support have gone through me like thread through a needle — everything I do is stitched with its colour.

Lastly, to those who opened their hearts and shared their stories within these pages, this book is for all of you too. *The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking* celebrates special moments and tucking a bit of comfort food into an everyday life. Thank you.

Rita Zahara



Launch of *Malay Heritage Cooking*, 2012 @Marina Mandarin, Singapore



# For Review Only

## Contents

Foreword • 11

Preface • 12

Acknowledgements • 14

Origins of Malays and Malay Ethnic Groups • 16

Nusantara Flavours — An Introduction • 19

Profiles of Featured Personalities • 22

### Rita Zahara’s Family Recipes

Bubur Ayam • 28

Shapsuka • 30

Ful (Kacang Pool) • 32

Bone Steak • 34

Ayam Penyet • 36

Nasi Minyak • 38

Chapatti • 40

Ikan Acar • 42

Ikan Tauco • 44

Kari Ikan • 46

Daging Roast • 48

Keema • 50

Sayur Berempah • 52

Sup Kambing • 54

Macaroni Soup • 56

Kentang Paprika • 58

Popiah Basah • 60

Ikan Cutlet (Sri Lankan) • 62

Kuih Bingka Suji • 64

Mango Tart • 66

Suji • 68

### Malay Home-cooked Meals

Pencuk Nenas (Asmah Laili) • 72

Mami’s Chicken Sambal (Asmah Laili) • 74

Exotic Green Rice (Asmah Laili) • 76

Lemongrass Tea (Asmah Laili) • 78

Baked Apples (Asmah Laili) • 80

Ikan Kurau Berlada (Asmah Laili) • 82

Ikan Sambal Sumbat (Som Said) • 84

Siput Lemak (Hjh Maimunah Restaurant) • 86

Pindang Serani (Hjh Maimunah Restaurant) • 88

Healthy Sambal Goreng Hari Raya (Prof. Fatimah Lateef) • 90

Spicy Tomato Lamb (Chef Siti Dzaleha) • 92

Sambal Goreng Kacang Ikan Bilis (Chef Ummi Abdullah) • 94

Opor Daging (Dr Jazlan Joosoph) • 96

Ayam Sambal Kichap (Dr Jazlan Joosoph) • 98

Corned Beef Stew (Suhaimi Rafdi) • 100

Sambal Udang (Suhaimi Rafdi) • 102

### Javanese Cuisine

Soto Daging (Dzar Ismail) • 106

Sambal Kentang Goreng (Dzar Ismail) • 108

Mangut Ikan (Dr Jazlan Joosoph) • 110

Botok-botok (Hisyam Hamid) • 112

### Baweanese Cuisine

Roti Boyan (Kamal Khamis) • 116

Celok Ikan Tongkol (Kamal Khamis) • 118

### Minangkabau Cuisine

Ayam Bakar (Warong Nasi Pariaman) • 122

Rendang Daging Pariaman (Warong Nasi Pariaman) • 124

Dendeng Belado (Sabar Menanti) • 126

Pepes Ikan (Sabar Menanti) • 128

Ayam Kalio (Chef Ummi Abdullah) • 130

### Straits Malay: Kelantan Cuisine

Ayam Percik Kelantan (Chef Mel Dean) • 134

Cek Mek Molek (Chef Mel Dean) • 136

Kuih Akok (Chef Mel Dean) • 138

### Straits Malay: Royal Malay Cuisine

Ikan Bakar Bendahara (Mamanda) • 142

Royal Laksa Mamanda (Mamanda) • 144

### Middle Eastern Malay Cuisine

Milk-fed Veal Spare Rib (Chef Amri Azim) • 148

Australian Lamb Shank ala Moroccan (Chef Amri Azim) • 150

### Indian Malay Cuisine

Biryani Rice with Mutton (Islamic Restaurant) • 154

Butter Chicken (Chef Syed Shahin Shah) • 156

Aaloo Paratha (Chef Syed Shahin Shah) • 158

Healthy Chicken Biryani (Prof. Fatimah Lateef) • 160

Mutton Rogan Josh (Bayview Tandoor Restaurant) • 162

### Chinese Malay Cuisine

Home-made Fish Ball Soup (Som Said) • 166

Queen Olive Rice with Century Egg Salad (Chef Siti Dzaleha) • 168

### Malay Kuih and Desserts

Abok-abok (Chef Syed Shahin Shah) • 172

Pengat Pisang (Hjh Maimunah Restaurant) • 174

Prune Lapis (Zan’s Treats) • 176

Cupcake Chendol (Zan’s Treats) • 178

Chocolate Hazelnut Mud Cake (Zan’s Treats) • 180

Pudding Raja Baginda (Mamanda) • 182

Puteri Seri Muka (Mamanda) • 184

Belebat Pisang (Mak Long) • 186

Pandan Coconut Panna Cotta (Royal Palm Restaurant) • 188

Pulut Serunding (Mak Long) • 190

Glossary • 193

About the Author • 200





# For Review Only

## Foreword

Food makes up a central and essential part of our lives. Today, we are spoilt for choice when eating out, especially in a cosmopolitan city like Singapore. Many eat out and do not venture to cook.

But have you ever thought of how exciting cooking and making your own dishes can be? You can have the free hand to mix and match various ingredients and prepare the most exotic of cuisines. Shopping for quality ingredients for your dishes can be so stimulating, putting your culinary creativity to the test.

*The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking* will document the cultural and culinary heritage of different *Nusantara* ethnic groups. Based on interviews with chefs, restaurateurs and personal stories from prominent Singaporean Malay families, the book will showcase specialty recipes of each ethnicity and the inspirations behind them.

*The Many Flavours of Malay Cooking* is essentially a collection of memories that records our cultural and familial food histories. It is a testimony to how the Malay cuisine has been affected and influenced by other cultures.

I congratulate Rita Zahara on the publication of yet another wonderful collection of authentic Malay recipes, from varying cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. It has been a pleasure working with you and seeing first hand your deep passion for wonderful food and cuisine.

As you browse through these pages, let them take you on a culinary journey, bringing back memories of faraway places, interesting cultures and people who have crossed paths with you, in the Malay Archipelago.

Try out these recipes for your loved ones. Be adventurous and bold. Innovate your own signature dishes. The flavours will linger and I hope they will now become the ‘spice of your life’.

Associate Professor Fatimah Abdul Lateef  
Senior Consultant  
Department of Emergency Medicine, Singapore General Hospital  
and Member of Parliament for Marine Parade GRC



# For Review Only

## Preface

Food is only food if it is prepared with love. It is with this love that I hope to preserve and document my cultural and culinary heritage so that we always remember who we are. Our traditions of the kitchen have transcended through time. It is timely to document these heritage recipes across the different Malay ethnic groups to remind us of how far we have come and of the rich diversity found within our own community.

Regardless of our origins, accents, language differences — Baweanese, Javanese, Jawi Peranakans, Minangkabaus — even as different as we may be culturally, our undeniable love for food is universal. Some foods err towards nourishing the body, while some others towards nourishing the soul. Both can be considered whole and real.

The following pages will be showcasing the specialty dishes of each ethnic group, the inspirations behind these culturally familiar foods. The Malays have been identified as great fishermen in the Malay Archipelago since the beginning of time. It seeks to highlight the Malays as great fishermen that have grown an identity for this archipelago since the beginning of time. By featuring fish dishes as well as a glossary of different types of fishes, we acknowledge the interplay of fish in our cooking.

I have also filled this book with some recipes of my own, and those that I've inherited from my dearest late mother, Hajjah Zabidah and mother-in-law, Shariffah Suhailah Alhady and family favourites.

The preceding sections breaks down recipes from some Malay sub-ethnic groups featuring famous restaurants, chefs and Malay personalities in Singapore. My friends have been very willing to share their recipes and stories. Highlights of the book includes their mini biographies, as well as personal memories, anecdotes and feelings to accompany each recipe. There is also an encyclopedic glossary of the ingredients that you will find useful.

You will also find recipes from various cultural exchanges (Middle Eastern Malay, Indian Malay, Sri Lankan Malay and Chinese Malay), a testament to the exchange of heritages in Singapore. The last section of the book features the ever-loved Malay *kuih* & desserts.

The book is both for beginners as well as advanced cooks. With simpler recipes for beginners and the more complex ones to add to your culinary repertoire. Use this book to jog your memories and to further your understanding of what the Malay community have protected so fiercely for generations to come.

Personally for me, my journey in the culinary world has only just begun. Under Li Da Foods, a company I co-founded, it leverages on innovation and technology to bring forth delicious and healthy food that are easily accessible anywhere in the world.

Li Da Foods spearheads CZ, its own online bakery [www.chezahara.com](http://www.chezahara.com). It was founded on the strength of our heritage recipes and a tribute to my grandmother, Che Zahara Noor Mohamed. Some of its recipes have been carefully handed down through three generations. Besides these original heritage recipes, we also create on-trend, pattern bakes, which are lovingly curated and crafted, to meet the discerning palette of today's customers. Our cookies, cakes and desserts begin with carefully tested recipes, highly controlled production and premium ingredients. At the same time, as part of our move towards healthy eating, our treats feature the 'skinny range' and 'Healthier Choice' Asian desserts with natural sugar.

Li Da Foods also manages a full-stack food delivery service — AMGD, which works on the concept of a virtual restaurant that has its own delivery fleet. AMGD's vision is at least one healthy meal a day, for every person, in as many cities in the world. Our operations are currently based in Singapore, and we are in a viable position for overseas expansion.

Like a good meal, this book and my food business ventures hope to fill your life with delicious, healthy food. May there be much joy and happiness in your life and at your table.



For Review Only

## Rita Zahara's Family Recipes

### PORRIDGE

*Bubur Ayam* • 28

### MAINS WITH BREADS

*Shapsuka* • 30

*Ful (Kacang Pool)* • 32

*Bone Steak* • 34

### RICE & BREAD DISHES

*Ayam Penyet* • 36

*Nasi Minyak* • 38

*Chapatti* • 40

### FISH DISHES

*Ikan Acar* • 42

*Ikan Tauco* • 44

*Kari Ikan* • 46

### SIDE DISHES

*Daging Roast* • 48

*Keema* • 50

*Sayur Berempah* • 52

### AFTERNOON TEA

*Sup Kambing* • 54

*Macaroni Soup* • 56

*Kentang Paprika* • 58

*Popiah Basah* • 60

*Ikan Cutlet (Sri Lankan)* • 62

### DESSERTS

*Kuih Bingka Suji* • 64

*Mango Tart* • 66

*Suji* • 68





## Shapsuka

**Mains with Breads:** When I first got married, my mother grew fascinated with Arab cooking and sought to learn all she could from my mother-in-law, Shariffah Suhailah Alhady. I fondly remember them eagerly exchanging recipes and cooking together in one kitchen. As *shapsuka* is best enjoyed with toasted French loaf, the way I have chosen to present it in this book is similar to the famous Italian bruschetta. My mother-in-law however, serves her *shapsuka* in a tray, with a touch of home-styled goodness.

Serves 4–6

Vegetable oil as needed

Red onions 4, peeled and cut into cubes

Water 125 ml

Minced beef 500 g, rinsed

Biryani powder 2 Tbsp

Potatoes 4, peeled, diced and boiled

Tomato purée 100 g

Salt to taste

Sugar to taste

Tomato 1, diced

Coriander leaves (cilantro) 3 sprigs + more to garnish

Eggs 4

French loaf as needed, toasted and thickly sliced

### GROUND PASTE

Red onion 1, peeled and sliced

Garlic 5 cloves, peeled and sliced

Ginger 1.25-cm knob, peeled and sliced

Dried red chillies 7, soaked to soften, then cut into short lengths

1. Preheat oven to 150°C. Line baking tray with aluminium foil.
2. Prepare ground paste. Combine onion, garlic, ginger and dried chillies in a blender and process into a paste.
3. Heat 2 Tbsp oil in a wok over medium heat. Sauté onions. Add ground paste.
4. Add water, then add minced beef, biryani powder and potatoes. Mix well.
5. Bring ingredients to the boil in a pot over low heat. Stir in tomato purée.
6. Season with salt and sugar to taste.
7. Add diced tomato and garnish with coriander.
8. Transfer *shapsuka* ingredients to prepared baking tray and bake for 45 minutes.
9. After 30 minutes of baking, add eggs and continue baking until done.
10. Garnish with coriander. Serve with toasted French loaf.





Ikan Acar

**Fish Dishes:** One thing that I have learnt throughout my years of cooking is that sometimes, the simplest recipes can be some of the tastiest. *Ikan acar* is one such recipe that my mother came up with. It is incredibly simple and I feel, tells the story of what home cooking is all about. When pressed for time, this is something that you can whip up in less than 30 minutes and yet it is still full of home-styled goodness.

Serves 4–6

Vegetable oil *as needed*

Spanish mackerel 1, *medium-sized, cut into steaks*

Dried red chillies 10, *soaked to soften, then cut into short lengths*

Candlenuts 4

Ground turmeric  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp

Green chillies 2, *halved*

Ginger 1.25-cm knob, *peeled and sliced*

Water 125 ml

Vinegar 2 Tbsp

Sugar *to taste*

GARNISH

Red chillies 4, *sliced*

Coriander (cilantro) leaves

1. Heat some oil in a wok over low heat and fry Spanish mackerel until half-cooked. Remove from heat and set aside to cool.
2. Combine dried red chillies, candlenuts and ground turmeric, green chillies and ginger in a blender and process into a paste.
3. Add paste into wok and stir-fry until fragrant.
4. Add water gradually and continue to stir.
5. Return Spanish mackerel back to wok and fry until fully cooked.
6. Season with vinegar and sugar to taste.
7. Dish out and garnish with red chillies and coriander. Serve.







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## Malay Home-cooked Meals

Whenever I have to travel for work or leisure, it is not uncommon to find restaurants that serve signature Malay cuisine such as nasi *lemak*, *rendang*, *mee siam*, *mee rebus* and even *epok-epok* or more popularly known as curry puffs. Often, one can also find ready-to-eat versions or pre-packed pastes in the supermarkets. Our Malay food has become commercialised and can be found almost anywhere around the world.

However, it all originated from the home kitchens of our mothers. Nothing tastes as good as a meal prepared with so much love and care. There are also dishes that can only be found in home kitchens — unique recipes that are created by our mothers and their mothers before them.

While this book celebrates the different kinds of Malay cuisine, it also celebrates the goodness of home-cooked Malay dishes. We want to contribute to your culinary experience by bringing these unique home recipes right to your own kitchen, wherever in the world you may be.

- Pencuk Nenas (Asmah Laili) • 72*
- Mami's Chicken Sambal (Asmah Laili) • 74*
- Exotic Green Rice (Asmah Laili) • 76*
- Lemongrass Tea (Asmah Laili) • 78*
- Baked Apples (Asmah Laili) • 80*
- Ikan Kurau Berlada (Asmah Laili) • 82*
- Ikan Sambal Sumbat (Som Said) • 84*
- Siput Lemak (Hjh Maimunah Restaurant) • 86*
- Pindang Serani (Hjh Maimunah Restaurant) • 88*

- Healthy Sambal Goreng Hari Raya (Prof. Fatimah Lateef) • 90*
- Spicy Tomato Lamb (Chef Siti Dzaleha) • 92*
- Sambal Goreng Kacang Ikan Bilis (Chef Ummi Abdullah) • 94*
- Opor Daging (Dr Jazlan Joosop) • 96*
- Ayam Sambal Kichap (Dr Jazlan Joosop) • 98*
- Corned Beef Stew (Suhaimi Rafdi) • 100*
- Sambal Udang (Suhaimi Rafdi) • 102*



# For Review Only

## Opor Daging (Dr Jazlan Joosoph)

*Opor daging* is a family favourite for consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, Dr Jazlan Joosoph, and his family. This is a staple dish that he grew up with and is unique to his Malay heritage. Made of beef cooked and braised in coconut milk with cabbages, *opor daging* can be enjoyed with a bowl of piping hot rice or even *lontong* (rice cakes).

Serves 4–6	Cabbage 2, small, cut into 4 pieces	Green chillies 4
Beef 1 kg, rinsed and cut into cubes	Salt to taste	Candlenuts 3, sliced
Lemongrass 2 stalks, ends trimmed and bruised	Crisp-fried shallots to garnish	Prawn (shrimp) paste ( <i>belacan</i> ) 2.5-cm piece
Galangal 7.5-cm knob, peeled and thinly sliced	Coriander leaves ( <i>cilantro</i> ) to garnish	Korma spices 250 g
Bay leaves 2	<b>GROUND PASTE</b>	Roasted coconut ( <i>kerisik</i> ) 1 small packet (120 g)
Coconut milk 500 ml	Onions 2, peeled and sliced	
	Garlic 3 cloves, peeled and sliced	

1. Prepare ground paste. Combine all ingredients in a blender and process into a fine paste.
2. Combine beef, lemongrass, galangal and bay leaves with ground paste in a pot. Bring to the boil over very low heat until beef is three-quarters tender.
3. Lower heat, then add coconut milk and return to the boil over low heat until beef is tender.
4. Add cabbage and leave to cook.
5. Season with salt to taste.
6. Dish out and garnish with fried shallots and coriander.
7. Serve with warm rice or *lontong*.







# For Review Only

## Malay Kuih and Desserts

The Malays refer to desserts as *pencuci mulut*. When translated, it literally means ‘mouth washer’, which refers to the simple act of cleansing one’s palate after a heavy meal. We have a way with words and a way with our desserts, both sweet and savoury.

Recently, with the influence of many cultures, access to a wider ranger of ingredients, and changing tastes, traditional Malay desserts have taken on new forms. They have been deconstructed and reintroduced with a new twist, such as the popular *ondeh-ondeh* rolls and ice *kacang* rolls from CZ Bakery.

While traditional desserts remain a hit for their sense of nostalgia and familiarity, these new flavour innovations by CZ Bakery are an attractive alternative to the younger generation as well as the international market.

*Abok-abok (Chef Syed Shahin Shah) • 172*

*Pengat Pisang (Hjh Maimunah Restaurant) • 174*

*Prune Lapis (Zan’s Treats) • 176*

*Cupcake Cendol (Zan’s Treats) • 178*

*Chocolate Hazelnut Mud Cake (Zan’s Treats) • 180*

*Pudding Raja Baginda (Mamanda) • 182*

*Puteri Seri Muka (Mamanda) • 184*

*Belebat Pisang (Mak Long) • 186*

*Pandan Coconut Panna Cotta (Royal Palm Restaurant) • 188*

*Pulut Serunding (Mak Long) • 190*



## *Abok-abok* (Chef Syed Shahin Shah)

For those who are not familiar with *abok-abok*, it is a quintessential Malay dessert made from sago (tapioca pearls), grated coconut and *gula melaka* (palm sugar). It has a rich, soft and slightly chewy texture with a centre that explodes in a burst of sweetness in your mouth. Traditionally wrapped using banana leaves, *abok-abok* can also be steamed in a muffin pan. This classic dessert is one of the earlier recipes that Chef Syed picked up when he first began his culinary journey.

**Makes 8 pieces**

Freshly grated coconut 4 Tbsp

Salt  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp

Pearl sago 10 Tbsp, soaked for 15 minutes and drained

Banana leaves 8, cut into 12-cm sheets each

Palm sugar (*gula melaka*) 4 Tbsp

Toothpicks as needed

1. In a bowl, strain grated coconut well. Add salt. Mix well.
2. Add drained pearl sago. Mix well with grated coconut.
3. Shape a piece of banana leaf into a cone shape and secure with a toothpick. Repeat for all banana leave sheets.
4. Fill half of banana leaf cone with coconut-pearl sago mixture.
5. Add some *gula melaka* and fill to the brim with coconut-pearl sago mixture. Secure top of cone with a toothpick.
6. Steam *abok-abok* for 15 minutes.
7. Remove and set aside to cool before serving.





# For Review Only

## About the Author

Singaporean multi-hyphenated media personality Rita Zahara is a woman who wears many hats. A television impresario, Rita has made her mark on screen, producing, writing and directing many acclaimed TV productions for both local and international platforms. A former journalist and newscaster, Rita later went on to become an author and entrepreneur.

With her journalistic experience and as a known celebrity chef, Rita's prominence among the Malay audience makes her the perfect candidate to represent the community and compile heritage recipes from the various Malay ethnic groups.

Rita's foray into gastronomy had an early start. She grew up around food, helping her late mother in the kitchen for her home catering business. Rita describes cooking and food as a way of life that brings her immense joy. Inspired by her late mother, Rita enjoys experimenting in the kitchen, often creating her own innovative recipes.

With a lifelong passion for cooking and food, Rita continues to expand her presence in the culinary world. In 2012, she authored *Malay Heritage Cooking*, which remains a best-seller to date.

Rita is also co-founder of Li Da Foods, a group of virtual food tech companies dedicated to bringing forth the best of delicious food from Asia to the rest of the world. Some of its online food stores include AMGD [www.amgd.sg](http://www.amgd.sg) and CZ Bakery [www.chezahara.com](http://www.chezahara.com).

Rita's versatility is evident as she juggles her ventures into the food service industry with another group of companies that focus on transmedia storytelling — Reta Transmedia, Reta Social Enterprise and Beehive Transmedia Incubator.

Rita is also heavily involved in humanitarian work for communities in South East Asia, empowering the access of women and children to education. She often conducts inspirational talks for adults, youths and children.