

Datuk Wan Ramlah Wan Abdul Raof Malaysia's chief statistician gets ...

Up close & personal

By CECILIA KOK
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WHAT'S boring and what's fun, really, is just relative. So, every time Datuk Wan Ramlah Wan Abdul Raof gets asked whether the job of a statistician is boring and dull (as many have perceived it to be), she will assertively say people have got the wrong idea.

"That's a misconception ... see beyond the numbers and the mediocrity of the work, and one would realise there's a lot of stories to be told, and hence, understand the importance of the job at hand," she says.

After all, having been with the Statistics Department for 34 years, Wan Ramlah is the right person to enlighten one as to how stimulating the job of a statistician can be.

"Every day, there are just new things to learn and do ... and I've truly enjoyed each day of my work here in the department throughout the years, despite the ups and downs," she says.

Her enthusiasm for her work has helped her rise through the ranks in the department; she was appointed the country's chief statistician three years ago.

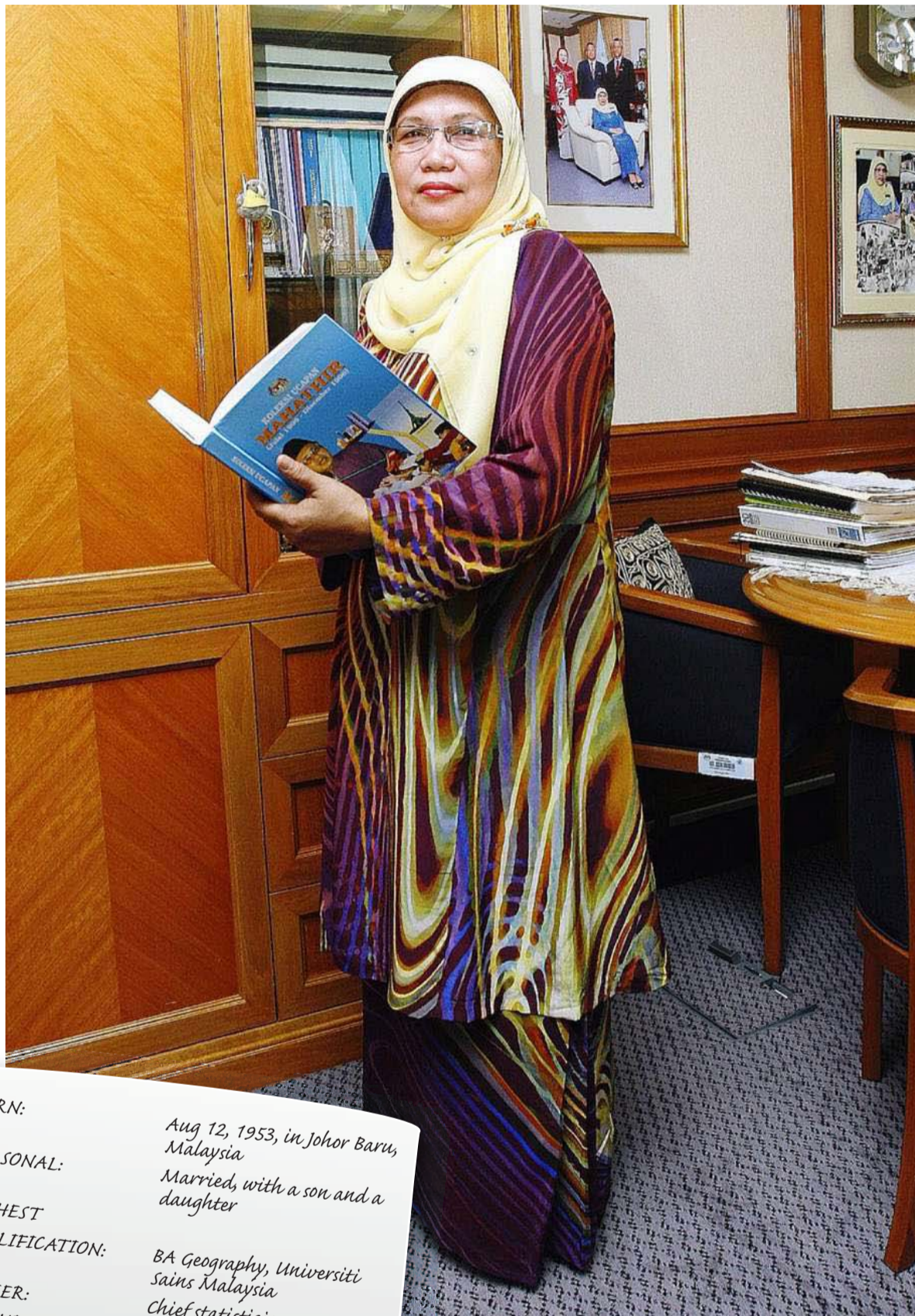
"My vision is to continue improving the work standards of the department to be at par with international statistical departments in developed nations such as Australia and New Zealand," Wan Ramlah shares.

"The emphasis is on two issues — the quality of data must be good to give the right indication of the country's economic and social progress to policymakers, and the timeliness of data delivery to stakeholders, as people always want data as of yesterday," she explains to *StarBizWeek* as she shows off some documents that indicate that the department's deliverables are already at par with the benchmark indicated by the International Monetary Fund.

Despite the importance of its job — that is, compiling the numbers that help us understand our world and essential data for the Government to formulate the right policies — the Statistics Department has not quite received the praise or credit due to it. As it's often quoted, statisticians are the unsung heroes of the country.

"It doesn't matter; what's most important is that we must continue to do our work to support all the stakeholders in the economy," says the bubbly and jovial Wan Ramlah.

Her office room, with a bright yellow and golden effect that exudes a sense of power, energy and excitement, bespeaks her character — warm and cheerful, and yet, traditional and religious.



Datuk Wan Ramlah believes that time and tide waits for no man

BORN: Aug 12, 1953, in Johor Baru, Malaysia

PERSONAL: Married, with a son and a daughter

HIGHEST QUALIFICATION: BA Geography, Universiti Sains Malaysia

CAREER: Chief statistician

FAVOURITE FOOD: Hot and spicy food like nasi lemak

FAVOURITE PLACES: None in particular, every place has its own beauty/speciality

HOBBIES: Any vigorous activities, shopping and reading

VALUES: Always do the right thing; be disciplined and empathetic; and fair & just.

INSPIRATION: The spirit & courage of a person

Datuk Hajah Wan Ramlah Wan Abdul Raof

She says: "I believe we must always follow the right path according to what God has told us to do ... and that's the utmost value that I hope to impart to my children."

Being the disciplinarian in the family, Wan Ramlah makes sure

that no matter how late her children come home, they would still keep to their prayer time. "I give my children the liberty to choose what they want to do in life ... but I want them to be good Muslims," she shares. Wan Ramlah has one daughter and a son from her marriage to her college sweetheart — who was also a statistician, but a retired one — for more than 30 years. Her daughter, already married, is currently working with the Customs Department, while her son is in a local college pursuing a music degree.

"We have a musician at home," she declares, her eyes brimming with pride.

Wan Ramlah, who does not play any musical instrument, is a great fan of music.

And when it comes to musical tunes, she says, she likes it "bouncy". So, she enjoys listening to Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley, among others.

And stacked among all her work-related CDs are a few pieces of albums by her favourite musicians. They come in handy when she needs to take a chill pill at work.

Wan Ramlah's job can be quite stressful as she has to manage between meeting the expectations of stakeholders and controlling the Statistics Department's large staff

effectively. The department at present has a staff strength of about 5,000, 80% of whom are doing the support role.

"It's really a test of my leadership skills," she explains.

To ensure the continuation of the department's top-level performance, Wan Ramlah says it is important for her to "turun padang" and constantly motivate and encourage her staff and remind them of the importance of producing quality data and meeting deadlines.

"The data they compile will affect the policymaking process in the country ... this is a subject close to everyone's heart," she explains.

"So, by reminding them about this, it helps them to understand the significance of their mission and that would hopefully lead them to do their work wholeheartedly," adds the lady whose ambition was once to become a lawyer after being influenced by a popular American TV series of the 1960s to 1970s, called *Ironside*, whose leading character was a wheelchair-bound lawyer.

But no one else has influenced Wan Ramlah as much as her parents, whom she says have inspired her in many different ways and encouraged her to strive for success in her studies and career during her younger days.

Recalling how her parents used to sacrifice for her and her siblings, Wan Ramlah shares that her mother had to pawn her jewellery to send her to university.

"Yet, she was still so happy, and was smiling away," Wan Ramlah reminisces.

With the career success that Wan Ramlah has acquired now, surely, her parents have reaped the rewards of their sowing. The eldest of six siblings, Wan Ramlah is looked upon as a mentor not only by her siblings, but also by her nephews and nieces.

"Some of the kids say they want to be like me, I tell them they should," she quips.

Despite her demanding and busy schedule, it seems Wan Ramlah has juggled her career and family life well by setting her priorities right. But there are certain areas that she confesses she has neglected due to time constraint. Her garden is one of them, and her penchant for sewing and knitting is another.

"Time and tide waits for no man; we must take the opportunity to do the best we can while we can because sometimes, opportunity knocks only once," Wan Ramlah says of what makes her so gung-ho about life.

Then again, she points out that one must also know how to appreciate what one has, including family members and health, before one loses any of those.

That aside, Wan Ramlah's focus now is on ensuring the success of the national census, which will take place from July 6 to Aug 22.

She says: "We have to make sure that every person in the country participates because we want good statistics; otherwise low-quality data would give the wrong scenario or indication to policymakers, and that would ultimately affect our lives."