

Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand Presents

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# Our Stories From The Heart:

Muslim women living in New Zealand

A resource kit for schools



IWC<sup>★</sup>NZ

# بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

## Dedication

This resource is dedicated to the beautiful memory of Ann Dysart of E Tū Whānau, who always found the time to listen and value our stories. Ann epitomised this whakatauki--

*Ma Te huruhuru, Ka rere Te manu -*

*Adorn the bird with feather so it can fly.*

## Acknowledgements

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### The Interviewees:

Dr Maysoon Salama, Sara Ismail, Faduma Yusuf, Fazilat Shah, Janifa Bhamji, Momina Saeed, Zubeda Shariff, Dr Noha Nasef, Dr Zainab Radhi, Asma Ibrahim, Haneen Alayan, Souhila Abdelaziz & Aliya Danzeisen

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## Our Stories from the Heart- A resource kit for schools

**T**his resource has been developed for social studies programs in New Zealand public schools. Our goal is to combat damaging stereotypes, impacting on the lives and opportunities of Muslim women in this country. We also encourage inclusion of the resource in other courses where it can help increase knowledge and understanding about the lives of Muslim women living in Aotearoa.

The resource is part of a five-year project undertaken by IWCNZ to tell Muslim women's stories and share their experience, history, contribution, resilience and strength with the wider New Zealand public.

Our stories are rich and varied; our experience is as diverse as the cultures we come from. For many Muslim women wearing the hijab means they are in the "front line" for public abuse, bullying or discrimination. Auckland University research shows that they are less likely to be hired than others, so this kind of stereotyping is extremely damaging.

Further, it has led to commonly-held popular beliefs that we don't speak for ourselves, we don't work outside the home, we are not engaged in the wider community and not allowed to make our own choices.

These assumptions have created an environment where our talent, capability and aspirations are frequently under-estimated and Muslim women are "back-footed from the get-go."

We believe media stereo-typing and other public discourse of this kind is harmful and contributes to a wider and more damaging climate of Islamophobia. IWCNZ hope this public education initiative will help wider society understand us more accurately so we can be more fully included in "the Team of 5 million."

We want the rest of New Zealand to see that we are proud of New Zealand and are already making a considerable contribution to it. We want them to see we have hopes, dreams and aspirations the same as they do.

We look forward to a future where the choices, capability and talent of New Zealand Muslim women are respected and embraced.

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## Introduction to our women

**T**he 13 Muslim women, who have generously shared their stories in this resource, bring together a collective story of diversity – that is important for New Zealanders to understand - in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This is a big story about family, faith and sisterhood. It is a story of joy and sorrow, pride in culture and achievement, education, dedication, gratitude and grace.

The women offer their koha to increase public understanding about the diversity that already exists within our country. It is offered in the hope that better knowledge and greater understanding will encourage the wider public to ask more questions and connect more deeply with the Muslim community – particularly its women – for it is they who are frequently on the front-line of hate speech and Islamophobia.

Aged from 27 through to 60+ some of our story-tellers have lived in New Zealand for over 40 years, while the newest arrival has only been here four years. Our contributors come from: Palestine, India, Fiji, Egypt, Kenya, Iraq, the USA, and Algeria. One woman also identifies as tangata whenua.

Almost all the women have complex and diverse backgrounds many are multi-ethnic, speak a number of languages and have travelled widely before making New Zealand home. While what unites them is religious affiliation to Islam, they all strongly identify as Muslim women, and they are proud of New Zealand. Ten of the 13 are mothers and some are grandmothers. They relate to a significant number of other communities i.e. professional, academic, national and local. They all take pride in engaging in community service.

Overall, the group includes: three women with PhD's, three lawyers, three social workers, one who is training to become a sign language interpreter, businesswomen and entrepreneurs, a manager of a Women's Refuge, a dentist, and a neo-natal nurse. A common theme is 'difficulty finding a job' in New Zealand with a number of women being told they were 'over qualified'. This has led to some of the group having to completely re-align their working lives to find meaningful work. Still, the women have shown a tenacity and a will to persevere that has allowed them to thrive.

These stories are only a small snippet of their lives, yet they offer a glimpse into the beauty and strength that exists within these women and the Muslim women's community of Aotearoa.

# Dr. Maysoon Salama

Leader, Scholar, Businesswomen, Mother & Grandmother



**D**r Maysoon Salama has a PhD in Food Microbiology from Oregon State University in the United States, but now dedicates her time to educating preschoolers from Muslim and non-Muslim families in New Zealand.

Maysoon and her husband, Dr Mohammad Alayan, came to New Zealand with their children in 1995. The third was born in New Zealand. For Maysoon, who was a top student, it had always been easy to get a job. However, it proved difficult in New Zealand. When she applied for a position at Canterbury University, she was discouraged to learn that she'd been eliminated in the first round of the selection process.

Not one to give up, this rejection led Maysoon and her husband to establish the An-Nur Childcare Centre in Christchurch in 2000 – the first of its kind in New Zealand – and in 2014, to open another centre in Dunedin.

“I’m glad I had a passion for education and serving the community, thus my husband and I were able to open the An Nur Childcare Centre and create a job opportunities, not only for me myself, but for others too.”

Maysoon has contributed to the community in other ways too – she was chair of the Islamic Women’s Council and co-founded the National Islamic Sisterhood Assembly (NISA).

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The eldest of seven brothers and sisters, Maysoon was born in Palestine and raised in Kuwait by two loving parents who believed in education and high moral standards.

Her most precious childhood memory is visiting Palestine. “We met our relatives in the occupied land for the first time; saw our village, our orchards, the home where I was born, my cradle and all the traditional hand-crafts. We ate the special fresh bread and traditional meals, and prayed in the Aqsa mosque.”

She also remembers her father saying education was the tool for success. “My dad’s words to us have been always engraved in my mind: Your land is occupied, so you have to be the best among the best to be valued.” This drive has underpinned an accomplished, generous and loving life that’s thrown significant challenges, changes and trauma her way.

Family keeps her strong. “Family means the world to me. I am proud of each and every one of them and feel surrounded by lots of love and affection. We support each other; serve one another and share life’s joys and sorrows.”

When she was three years old, the family moved to Kuwait, where Maysoon later completed a Bachelor of Science and worked at the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research. She was then awarded a scholarship to Oregon State University to undertake her Master’s and PhD.

During the Kuwait/Iraqi war, Maysoon and her husband decided to travel from the US to Jordan to visit family who’d witnessed the war. But when they tried to return to the US, they were turned back because their visa had been revoked by the US as a consequence of the war.

“We were stuck in Jordan for six months with no money other than what we’d received in compensation for our lost luggage. I was dev-

asted because I couldn’t finish my PhD after four years of hard work.”

Their friends and university supervisors rallied, advocating on their behalf. And after six months, they were able to return to the US where Maysoon could complete her studies.

Despite being miserable, the time in Jordan was not lost. “I had time to reflect on my life. I became closer to Allah, I started wearing the Hijab, I volunteered as a teacher and my son had a chance to learn Arabic. My husband volunteered in a hospital lab. We visited Palestine, met our families from both sides, and so much more.”

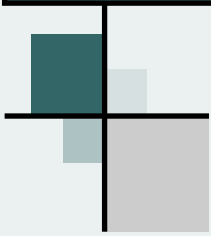
The March 15 Christchurch mosque massacre in 2019 impacted personally on Maysoon: her beloved oldest son, Atta, a well-known and highly regarded Futsal player, coach, businessman starting out on an IT entrepreneur, was martyred, while her husband was badly injured and continues to suffer from the extensive bullet wounds.

When she re-opened the Christchurch childcare centre after the shootings, Maysoon dealt with the fallout on the very young children, a number of whom had lost parents; her staff also lost loved ones. As chair of the Islamic Women’s Council at that time, she also stepped into a public role, appearing before the Royal Commission of Inquiry and in the media to talk about the impact of the massacre.

“After the March 15 massacres, the whole country came together in support of our loss. The amount of support that I had from the community at large was overwhelming and amazing,” she says.

Looking forward, Maysoon believes New Zealand can continue to improve on many fronts: “In 50 years’ time I hope we will be more inclusive and responsive to diversity. I hope we will remain peaceful, prosperous and economically stable. I’d also like to see child poverty eradicated,” she says.

*Touching the Hearts of Many*



# Janifa Bhamji

## Social worker & Mother of Four

**S**ocial worker and mother-of-four, Janifa Bhamji is a Muslim who is of Māori and Fijian Indian descent. “At the end of the day, I am Muslim, Fiji Indian and Māori. This is my identity that I value, and I have a responsibility towards my family, my community and my society. I always have to be respectful of the cultural spaces that I’m in,” she says.

Born and raised in New Zealand, Janifa has a Māori mother, her father is first generation Fijian and her paternal grandparents were born in Gujarat, India. “My family shares the Māori, Fiji and Gujarati cultures, and our paradigm is based on our faith, Islam, so we have a very blended way of life, which I enjoy and love.” When Janifa was a teenager, she went to live with her dadi (grandmother) in Fiji for four years, attending school there, where she learnt more about her Gujarati culture.

Before becoming a social worker, Janifa travelled and worked for 10 years in Canada and the United States, and these experiences have also shaped her world view. “I was able to see beyond what New Zealand had to offer and bring all those experiences back here to share with my family, friends and community. There are a lot of similarities, but there are some differences that make everything interesting.”

Janifa studied a Bachelor of Bicultural Social Work at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa when she returned to New Zealand, and she now works in mental health services, covering the greater Auckland region. “I’m passionate about transforming and empowering people through my work, and working with diverse communities and cultures,” she says.

Despite her many successes, Janifa’s greatest achievement is wearing a hijab. “I had taken my hijab off in the past, but I’ve become very determined to wear it. I’ve had it on now for about 10 years, and I feel incomplete without it. Wearing the hijab empowers me to stand in my mana, but it also identifies me as Muslim, so it keeps me humble,” she says.

Growing up in Auckland with her three siblings, Janifa benefited from the complementary forces of her mum and dad. “Dad was always striving for something better for us, especially when it came to education, including our Islamic studies and he still has that influence with my kids – he’s always telling them to aim for their best.”

Janifa’s mum, on the other hand, “lived in the spirit of the moment”, so life was never dull. “Each day was an adventure with her. During the school holidays we always went camping to all sorts of campgrounds. We would just pack our bags and leave. I love that my mum was very adventurous, and I think I got a lot of those qualities from her.”



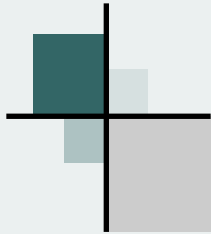
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Now, with three sons and a daughter, aged 9 to 18, and extended family nearby, life continues to be eventful. “I have a very feisty active household,” laughs Janifa. “In New Zealand having four children is considered a large family, but I enjoy it. My parents and my siblings are all in New Zealand, and I’m fortunate we are nearby, so I have a place to go back and forth. Ultimately, we are an everyday family getting on with our lives the best we can.”

Contributing to the community is important to Janifa, and she hopes to instill that value in her children. She attends cultural events, seminars and workshops, and contributes her time in the community. “I don’t restrict myself to one culture or community,” she says “As a social worker, I’m always mindful of the role that I play, so I like to step into other cultural spaces so I can experience them for myself and learn about them. I like to be inclusive, because at the end of the day, we’re all one big whānau and we all share the same values.”



*Muslim, Fiji Indian and Māori:  
This is my identity.*



# Asmaa Ibrahim

## Lawyer, Wife of an Imam & Mother

**E**gyptian born lawyer and mother-of-four, Asmaa Ibrahim (36) fulfills a unique role as the wife of an Imam (spiritual leader) in Wellington. She's proud of living a life that's authentic, regardless of what's been thrown at her.

Asmaa moved to New Zealand in 2007 and says love first brought her here. Back then, her husband was offered a job as Imam at the Mosque in Hawke's Bay. It was a three-year appointment. Now, 14 years later, and based in Wellington, the family has made New Zealand their home.

Asmaa recalls being homesick for the first four years in New Zealand, but reflects on how the simplicity of Kiwi culture won through and made her feel at home. Now she does all kinds of Kiwi things including "turning up to official meetings in her jandals!"

"Muslims and non-Muslims can both misunderstand what it is to live as a Muslim," she says. "Some Muslims think living according to the Quran needs to be harsh and strict, and non-Muslims think Muslims are not modern and would be hard to live with. Another misunderstanding non-Muslims have is that Muslim girls are forced to wear the hijab. While this may be true for some, most girls choose to wear it as part of their identity and faith."

Looking back, Asmaa says her mother was the most significant person in her life growing up.

"My mother became a widow very young and raised seven children on her own. My father was in deep debt when he died, and she in-

herited it. After he died, a lot of friends and family broke ties with her in case she asked for help. She kept all of this to herself and never allowed us to feel deprived. She showered me with love. I am indebted to her to this day."

In her adult life, Asmaa counts her husband and children as important too. "My husband has always treated me with lots of love and respect. He has been very understanding and kind, allowing me to grow as a person and define my own self. I am also grateful to my children who have taught me to be patient and not take things for granted."

When Asmaa's children were younger, she worked nightshifts "with an amazing group of ladies" at the New World in Hastings. She remembers their kindness, especially one woman who taught her to drive. Now she's "paying that kindness forward" by teaching other women to drive.



However, it's volunteer work in schools that brings Asmaa "real joy".

"I see a lot of Muslim parents struggling to understand the school system here. We come from a background where academic just means studying. But in New Zealand it's about teaching children confidence and building them up to be well-rounded human beings – academically and socially.

"I help the new families settle in, and I help children settle in the classroom and provide support if they're struggling in the class. I also help families and schools understand each other better."

Fostering a wider sense of community is also a strong part of who Asmaa is.

"Community is not only about having the same language, culture or belief, but it's who you live and interact with. My neighbours, workmates and classmates are all part of my community. I have a duty towards all of them.

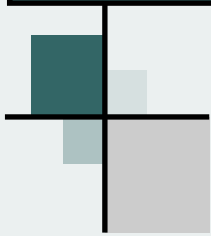
"Whenever I move into a place, I visit all my neighbors with a plate of baked goodies and introduce myself and my family. This way the neighbors know me, I know them and we keep in touch."

Community was particularly important after the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019. "After March 15<sup>th</sup>, Muslim women were scared to go out of their homes, scared to do their shopping and send their children to school. My husband was in Christchurch helping, and I was here in Wellington, so I started talking to the ladies, and I went shopping with them so they didn't feel alone."

Asmaa is very proud of New Zealand and impressed by how respectful people are. "Recently I went to visit two sisters, one of them was sick, the other had lost a family member in the Mosque attacks. After the visit, I went into a secondhand shop. There was an elderly lady standing next to me; she just turned around and hugged me with no words. I just said, thank you. It was such a beautiful moment."

## *Paying Kindness Forward*





# Sara Ismail

## Small Business owner, Mother & Grandmother

**D**airy owner Sara Ismail is proud of her life and how far she's come, but along the way there have been many hurdles and great sorrow.

Born in the sleepy village of Manekpor Tankoli in Gujrat, India, Sara arrived in New Zealand on an unseasonably cold Christmas day in 1975. She was joining her husband's family who had lived in Christchurch since the early 1910s. "It was magical, but at the same time, the cold was a new experience," she recalls.

There were many other firsts in New Zealand, and Sara felt "shy and overwhelmed" by the city of Christchurch. She didn't speak English, but picked up enough to get by.

In time, Sara and her husband, Yusuf Ismail, had four children: Salim, Raesha, and twins Junaid and Zahid. But it wasn't until the children were older and Sara had managed to get work in a local factory that things began to turn around for her. "I made lifelong friends in the clothing factory, improved my English and gained a lot of confidence in myself and my ability to earn money and provide for my children." These friends spoke out when they learned Sara was being paid the student rate, arguing her case and securing a fair wage for her.

In 1988, Sara and Yusuf took the brave step of buying the Springs Road Dairy in the suburb of Hornby. Her husband was unwell at the time, so Sara ran the shop with the support of her children. The business has now been in the family for 33 years.

The dairy has been a source of constant enjoyment for Sara, not only the satisfaction of mastering the complexities of business ownership, but also because of the people that she's met. "Running my own business and chatting with my customers brings me a lot of joy. Over the years, we have had a lot of loyal regulars. It's nice to see the young boys and girls who've come in with their parents grow up to be good, decent human beings, and then bring their own families to the dairy. It's good to meet new people who move in the neighborhood and listen to their stories. I also like to give directions to people who stop at the dairy to find out how to get places."

When Yusuf passed away on 14 July 2014, their son Junaid took over running the shop with Sara. The pair shared a special relationship: "We used to sit and have many good conversations. He would always make me feel better when I was feeling down or needed some advice."



Then tragedy struck. Junaid was killed at the Al Noor Mosque in the March 15 Christchurch shootings in 2019, which claimed 51 lives. He was 36 years old and the father of three young children.

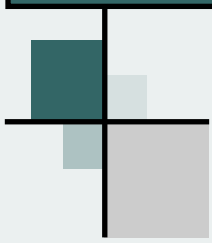
Friends and community rallied behind Sara and her family, and there was an outpouring of sympathy and support – bunches of flowers and cards surrounded the dairy and messages were chalked on the footpath. Sara’s friend and her daughter kept the shop operating. “Sushila and her family have been a pillar of strength for my family and me. She has always been there for me and stepped in whenever I needed help.”

After March 15, Sara admits that her “heart lost the feeling of happiness”. However, her family continues to bring her pleasure, and she counts her children among her greatest achievements. “I raised my children who are not only good citizens of this country but also contributing to the economy.”

And there are now two more grandchildren to be thankful for. “It gives me a lot of joy to welcome new members into our family,” she says.



*From Gujrat to New Zealand: A  
Journey of Joy and Sorrow*



# Faduma Yusuf

## Neonatal Nurse & Mother

**B**orn into a nomadic tribe in rural Kenya Faduma Yusuf now finds herself in “a different universe”, living in New Zealand, university qualified and working as a nurse.

“I was born in the most rural place, where people had nothing,” says the 30-year-old. “When my mum gave birth to me, she picked me up and kept walking with the camels and the herders as they went from place to place finding pastures.”

However, Faduma left the nomadic lifestyle when she was two years old and went to live with her aunt and uncle in Nairobi, enabling her to get hospital treatment she needed for a serious lung condition. “I was a whāngai, as Māori call it. It’s not a real adoption, but when your family takes you in and takes care of you for the foreseeable future.”

So, back in 1995, when her aunt and uncle decided to immigrate to New Zealand in search of a better future for their children, Faduma, by now four years old, went with them as their daughter.

“I have two sets of families,” says Faduma. “I was raised by my uncle and auntie in New Zealand, so I call them my mum and dad. They have six kids of their own, who I call my brothers and sisters, and I’m their seventh.”

Then I have my biological mum and dad, and eight siblings in Kenya.”

In New Zealand, Faduma’s mum played a significant role in her life: she was the main carer and also worked as a cleaner. “She’s a hard-working lady,” says Faduma.

Faduma grew up with an internal struggle between the cultures of her birthplace and adopted country: “I feel like I was a third culture – I was a kid who was in one way Somali, so I had to listen to my parents, and I was also a Kiwi kid, where the culture is to do your own thing, and have your own thoughts. But at the end of the day, I realised my parents loved me and were only giving me advice because it’s what’s best for me.”

New Zealand gave Faduma educational opportunities she otherwise wouldn’t have had, and encouraged by her mum; she worked hard to complete her studies. “My proudest achievement is graduating from university, because I was the first in eight or nine generations of my family that were able to do that because they’re nomadic people.”

*From Nomad to Neonatal Nurse*

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Faduma has had many different roles as a nurse, including in orthopedic trauma, oncology and older person's health, and is now a neonatal nurse at Christchurch Women's Hospital. Being a Muslim and wearing a hijab has been a mixed blessing in her working life. "Initially, I felt self-conscious when I was applying for jobs as I was the only hijab in all the interviews," she says. "But in retrospect, it probably was easier for me to get a job, as it made me more visible."

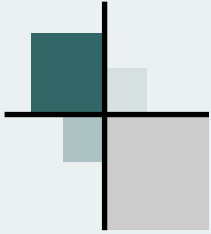
In her current job, Faduma cares for premature and sick full-term babies, and provides support to their parents. It's demanding but rewarding work. "There are many challenges – seeing a sick new-born and the mental strain for their parents. But seeing parents handle a bad situation gives me courage as their nurse, and makes me feel humbled as they let me in to their most vulnerable space."

When Faduma was planning the birth of her own daughter, she chose a home birth so she could hold on to the cultural practises that are important to her, which she felt were unfeasible in a hospital setting. These included playing recordings from the Quran and duas (prayers) during her labour. For her baby she wanted the azan, the Muslim call to prayer, which is customary for the father to whisper in the baby's right ear as the first words it hears.

"I didn't want to miss any of those crucial moments," she says. "In the hospital, there is a chance your baby is going to be taken away to be assessed when it is born, and the azan may be forgotten. My midwives were very supportive of that and my husband was fantastic."

Now, Faduma embraces the responsibilities of being a mum and a nurse, with little spare time for anything else: "I am really passionate about being a nurse, being a mom, and living a healthy life," she says.





# Zubeda Shariff

Women's Refuge Manager & Mother of Four



The youngest of six children, Zubeda Shariff was only five months old when her mother died and her father took over raising her and her siblings in Fiji. Thanks to her father's progressive outlook, she and her sisters grew up as equals with their brothers. "He was a fair man and never distinguished between his sons and daughters. At that time, most girls in Fiji were married off when they were 16 years old, but we were encouraged to go to university and study."

Growing up on a large farm, it was all hands on deck as Zubeda and her siblings juggled the demands of farm work with schoolwork. "When we came home from school, we would quickly have something to eat and head out to the farm to help till sunset. We had a generator which turned off at 9 o'clock, and then we used a small kerosene lamp to study," she says.



On Saturdays, Zubeda helped her father sell vegetables at the local market. But Sunday was “a fun day”, and they shared a big family afternoon lunch together.

Zubeda came to New Zealand 24 years ago to pursue an arranged marriage. Her husband was born and raised in New Zealand, but his parents were also from Fiji. The couple now have four children.

The first few years were challenging, as Zubeda grappled with many aspects of life in New Zealand. “Despite the fact that the education system in Fiji was all in English, I initially struggled with the language. The other biggest learning was how things worked in New Zealand.”

Zubeda started learning the Kiwi way of doing things through people she met at a childcare centre where she took her first child. This opened her eyes to different cultures as well as to her own. “I would talk to different people and listen to the stories of those who came from other places and those who were born and raised here. It led to a shift for me, as I started to connect those stories to my own values and culture, and life in Fiji.”

From modest beginnings as a cleaner and babysitter, Zubeda is now the manager of the Palmerston North Women's Refuge, overseeing 23 staff in three districts. She is

responsible for monitoring performance, liaising with the national office and overseeing service contracts. “I love my role and love hearing about positive outcomes,” she says. “It brings me great joy knowing that we’re making a difference in people’s lives.”

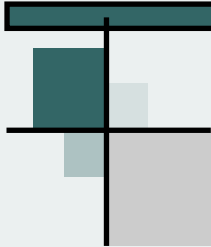
Community is important to Zubeda. She contributes wherever she can to her local Muslim and Fiji Indian communities. What’s more, these networks have supported her through some personal challenges. And there’s always an “overwhelming response” when Zubeda has called on her communities to help refugee families that she’s involved with through the refugee resettlement programme. “Many times the Muslim community has come together to pay the bond or rent for those who can’t afford it,” she says.

Zubeda has come a long way since her first tentative steps in a new country, but she has never forgotten where she comes from.

“I am very proud of what I have achieved in New Zealand,” she says. “From the moment that I came I was able to do a lot of things independently, despite many challenges that I faced. I found out about things myself and learned the process. I worked hard, but at the same time maintained my values and my beliefs, and that has been part of my success. It is reflected in where I am today and where my kids are too.”

## *Mastering Life in Aotearoa*





# Zainab Radhi

Scholar, Business Owner & Mother

**D**r Zainab Radhi spent most of her childhood in Iraq living in the devastation of war. She was immensely relieved to arrive in New Zealand in 1994, where she could feel safe and make a home.

One of her strongest childhood memories was of the Iraq Iran war ending in 1988 – she was only four when it started.

“The political situation was full of fear, and my parents compensated for the hardships in the country by giving extra doses of love and care.

“Living through a war is an experience I don’t wish on anyone. When the war was over, we felt relieved and free, but it was a short-lived because the Gulf War started soon after. That’s when my family decided to leave Iraq.”

Living under an authoritarian dictatorship was hard for the family of six, and in 1991, her father, a law professor, and her mother, a judge, left Iraq to create a better life for themselves and their four children. They started out in Jordan, where her father taught at the law school, and subsequently moved to New Zealand.

“It was nice to come to New Zealand where we could settle down, feel safe and call it home. I am always grateful to my parents, my husband and my children for what they’ve contributed to our life journey,” she says.

Zainab’s brothers came to New Zealand first and her family joined them in 1994. Sadly, her father passed away in Jordan, so wasn’t able to join them.

Now she says one of the most Kiwi things about her is attending weekend sports with her kids. “It’s not something I remember back home, so waking up at 7am on weekends to watch and cheer a seven-year-old kids’ game is something I’ve learned here.”



*A Smart Start for  
Refugees and  
Migrants*

Since arriving in New Zealand, Zainab has worked as an interpreter and a community developer with the Red Cross, and more recently, started her own businesses – SMART Start Business & Aotearoa Refugee and Migrant Support Services (ARMSS). She's also tutored business law at Victoria University and, recently, at WELTEC.

SMART Start and ARMSS support migrants and refugees starting out in business and in life. Zainab says while many people who come to New Zealand as refugees and migrants are highly skilled, they often lack: an understanding of the system, proficiency in English, the right networks, local qualifications and experience.

"People who are refugees and migrants often stick in their own bubbles and sometimes stay on the benefit for years, not really contributing. It's not because they're lazy or don't want to work, it's mainly because the bridge isn't there. We try to provide that bridge," she says.

The organisation provides a number of programmes; Family Resettlement Support, Cultural Bridging Facilitation, Cultural Competency Training and Business Start-up Support.

About 60,000 Muslims can't get finance or housing, because they're not willing to pay interest, so the organisation is working to introduce a social justice and housing finance scheme based on the Islamic Economic System which is interest and speculation free, and where the profits go to the people.

The "most joyous" part of Zainab's work is helping people. "When someone I've helped says they feel more independent, more settled and are doing well, it means a lot to me."

Although she has a Ph.D. in International Law of Economic and Human Development and Islamic Finance, it was difficult for Zainab to get a job when she first arrived: 99% of the time she was told she was overqualified. Because the New Zealand system is largely based on networks, she found it hard knowing where to start.

"When people come to New Zealand as migrants and refugees, they often focus on developing skills and qualifications and don't have the time to network or socialise. Hence, they have "lots of qualifications, but no real

networks and as a result no jobs".

"It took my husband a long time to find a job even though he's a very good engineer who's worked in many international companies. Since I was overqualified, I decided to create a job for myself."

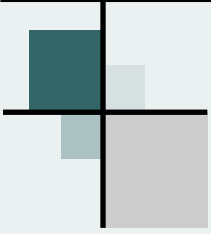
Zainab has lived in Iraq, Jordan, Emirates, Saudi Arabia and the United States and New Zealand, and says she's built her own culture based on the experiences and cultures she's experienced".

Community service and belonging are very important to her. She sees herself belonging to the Muslim and Arab communities, and her neighborhood, school and work communities as well as a community of people from different ethnic backgrounds.

She is very proud of New Zealand but would like to see us be a more productive country with a stronger voice in the international community.

The March 15 Christchurch mosque shootings brought the whole country together. It was heart-warming to see that despite political and other differences people may have had with each other, when there was a need for New Zealand to band together, we did," she says.





# Fazilat Shah

Barrister, Business Owner & Mother



**A** successful barrister with her own law practice and mother-of-three, Fazilat Shah worked hard to achieve her career goal. At age 16, she left her family and friends behind in Fiji to travel to New Zealand on a student visa, hoping to study law, which wasn't then available in her homeland.

"One of the most interesting things in my life was my journey from Fiji to New Zealand as a young teenager seeking further education, and how that journey unfolded into a meaningful and rewarding life," says Fazilat.

The youngest of four children, Fazilat enjoyed a "beautiful childhood" in Fiji. Her mother was a schoolteacher and her father a carpenter, which took him away from the family during the week to work on building sites. "One of my fondest memories is waiting on Friday for my father to arrive home. When I caught a glimpse of him, I would run to greet him and discover what treats he had brought us, as he would bring home fresh fish and seafood to prepare delicious meals for us."

It was a far cry from her maternal grandfather's experience of Fiji. As a young man in India, he was promised a free passage to a "beautiful island", but was signed on as an indentured labourer and forced to work in the sugar cane fields when he arrived. "His life's journey was extremely difficult," says Fazilat. "But his decision to step on the ship that brought him to Fiji meant I was born in a beautiful place and have many good memories of growing up in a wonderful multi-cultural community."

Fazilat left that life behind for good when she came to New Zealand. At first, she attended Epsom Girls Grammar School in Auckland, boarding with relatives, and then flatting with her older brother, who was also studying here. With her parents only able to contribute a little money, both Fazilat and her brother worked part-time to support themselves through their studies. While Fazilat was always motivated to be successful, there was the added pressure of her visa, which required her to pass her exams each year for it to be renewed.

After completing high school, Fazilat continued on her path to becoming a lawyer. She was accepted into intermediate law at Auckland University, and then into law school. After four years' study, she completed her Bachelor of Laws, expecting to return to home. But she was unable to find suitable work in Fiji, so set about pursuing a permanent life in New Zealand: she got a job in a respected law firm in downtown Auckland and, based on her work, gained permanent residency.

In 1994, by now married and with a two-year-old, Fazilat's law career was interrupted when she joined her husband in Medina, Saudi Arabia, where he was doing Islamic studies. There she worked for two years as an English tutor, learnt Arabic, "saw how the local people lived" and made friends with students from all over the world. "It was truly an adventure into an unknown world for me," she says.

On their return to New Zealand, Fazilat set up a law firm, specialising in family law litigation, which she's now been running for 24 years.

"I'm proud that I have been able to serve the community of Auckland with my legal services and help wherever I can."

She's also proud of her country: "For a small country, New Zealand has an incredible amount of clout and strong and charismatic leaders. The superb handling of the 2019 March 15 attack against Muslims, the management of Covid-19 and keeping our people safe makes me incredibly proud of my nation of five million. New Zealand stands for diversity, strength, upholding and valuing the rights of its indigenous people and minority groups, welcoming refugees from war torn countries, and providing a safe and peaceful home."

*Hard Work  
and  
Determination  
bring Career  
Success*



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# Souhila Abdelaziz

Life Coach & Mother of Three



**S**ouhila Abdelaziz took a chance when she uprooted her family from their settled life in Algeria to bring them halfway across the world to start a new chapter in New Zealand.

“My husband was initially reluctant to make the move because New Zealand is so far from home. It takes 30 hours’ flying time, with three plane changes en route to get here from Algeria, but I felt that I wanted a big change at this point of my life. So, I seized what I saw as a divine opportunity,” says the mother-of-three.

Souhila describes herself as a spiritual person, who is constantly pushing herself out of her comfort zone in search of new experiences and personal growth. “I am proud of being a spiritual seeker and having this

craving towards growing and always seeking more – I am always seeking to be better, do better and become a better version of myself. Silence and meditating, growing and continuous learning all bring me a lot of joy.”

It was only after extensive research that Souhila’s family decided on New Zealand. “We chose to come to New Zealand because we wanted a peaceful place. I’d heard a lot about how embracing the country is and that it is a place where all cultures and religions can coexist and live together. That was something we wanted to experience for ourselves.”

Wrenching themselves from their families was one of the most difficult parts of immigrating. Souhila has three brothers and two sisters back in Algeria as well as her in-laws. “Our families did not see the point of us migrating to another country and considered it a big betrayal, because we had a beautiful life in Algeria. We were settled financially and socially, and we were happy, but our souls were eager for more. Our family couldn’t understand that, so there was a lot of guilt.”

Souhila’s husband, who is an engineer, enabled the family to move after he got a contract in New Zealand. However, Souhila, who had worked as a logistics and change manager in Algeria for 15 years, found it difficult to get work in the corporate world. She says this was “a blessing in disguise” and gave her the incentive she needed to take another radical step and set up a life coaching business.

Her business, The Metamorphosis Path Coaching Institute and Academy, works to bring positive change in people's lives. "It's very rewarding seeing people changing and to see how, by simply changing the way people think and the way they feel, by healing their traumas and by parenting themselves they can change their entire life."

Through one-on-one coaching, workshops and webinars, Souhila strives to achieve mental, emotional, physical and real spiritual well-being for her clients. She posts a weekly podcast, where she shares "nuggets of wisdom on how to soar and change your life." As a service to the community, she also offers free monthly coaching sessions to Muslim women.

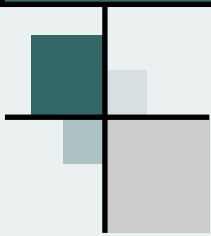
In fact, Muslim women are a key focus of Souhila's work. While she acknowledges that there are many powerful women in the Muslim community, she also believes there is more work to be done. "A lot of Muslim women don't know their value. They don't know that they are significant, so through empowering them and changing those limiting be-

liefs, I'm widening their horizons towards the infinite possibilities and choices that will open their eyes and help them grow."

New Zealand has been life changing for Souhila, but there is a long way to go on her journey. "I am proud of stepping into my life's purpose and doing something I love. I'm not where I want to be yet, but the starting point is very promising."

*Becoming a  
better version of  
myself*





# Noha Nasef

Postdoctoral Researcher in Biomedical Sciences

**W**hen Noha Nasef was growing up, she moved often as her parents, originally from Egypt, searched for a place they could call home. This transient life wasn't always easy.

"I used to be very stressed as a child. I didn't have a sense of belonging anywhere," she says. "I used to stress about really simple things, like being late for school and not doing my homework. But as I grew up, I realized that there will be good days and bad days, and it's really not worth stressing about things. We just need to manage life the best way we can."

Life changed when Noha was a teenager and she moved from Dubai to New Zealand with her mother and sister. As a pharmacist, her mother had gained entry under the skilled migrant category, and the small, tight-knit family settled in Auckland. "There wasn't really a future for us in Dubai," says Noha. "Coming from Egypt, we were treated as second-class citizens. It doesn't matter how long you live there, you're never home. My mother moved us to New Zealand in search of a better future, and we love it here."

Noha now counts herself as a true Kiwi. "The most Kiwi thing about me is that I appreciate the Māori history and tikanga Māori, and I try to instil it in everything that I do at work. I have the DIY genes in me too. I enjoy being active, and I love rugby and the All Blacks!"

During the 2011 Rugby World Cup, Noha followed the All Blacks religiously. When she had to travel to Dubai to visit her extended family there, she took her aunty who wears the full niqab to watch the All Black-France

match at an expat resort that was livestreaming the game. "I'm sure people in that resort had never seen someone dressed in a niqab so close up before, and then there was me in my hijab and full All Black gear ready to support my team!"

With the educational opportunities and financial support available in New Zealand, Noha studied at Auckland University, completing a PhD in biomedical science. "Earning my PhD was a big achievement, and I'm proud of that. It was basically three years of blood, sweat and tears. To be acknowledged for that and awarded a doctorate at the end was a proud moment for me."

Now a postdoctoral researcher, Noha worked for a year at the University of Dublin in Ireland. Back in New Zealand, she works at Massey University in Palmerston North, where she is studying the impact of food on health. "I love how we are always pushing the boundaries or the frontier of our understanding, and continuously learning and appreciating the new knowledge that keeps coming in and using it and applying it and sharing it with the rest of the world."

*"I never felt I  
belonged  
anywhere  
more than  
here"*

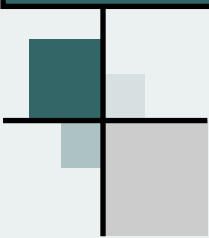


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Two things have complicated her career progression: being a woman and being Muslim. “I have to put in extra effort because my name is very Muslim and I wear a hijab. But a good thing is that there are people out there who are employing people from different backgrounds and who care about diversity in employment.”

Nonetheless, just as Noha has embraced New Zealand as home, she feels that the country has also embraced her. “I’m very proud of this multicultural country called New Zealand. It has this ability to make everybody feel that they belong. That sense of belonging is something I truly admire, especially as somebody who has travelled around the world. I’ve never felt I belonged anywhere more than I have in New Zealand.”





# Haneen Alayan

Dentist, Volunteer & Fundraiser

**D**entist and oral health warrior Haneen Alayan is using her knowledge and skills to improve people's lives. Most significantly, the 27-year-old has given thousands of dollars' worth of free dental care to those in need. Since graduating as a dentist from Otago University four years ago, Haneen has financed more than \$300,000 worth of dental care through fundraising projects she has organised.

The work is rewarding, and understandably, she's proud of her achievements. "Some of the best results have been with patients in their early 20s who've had a huge number of dental problems that they can't afford to fix. They haven't been able to eat or sleep properly for many years, so life is pretty tough. At the end of the treatment, I can see how much difference it's made to their mental health. The even cooler thing is when they listen and take the opportunity to make changes," she says.

A middle child sandwiched between two brothers, Haneen grew up in New Zealand, having moved here when she was just one-year-old. The family had been living in Corvallis, Oregon, in the United States for about 10 years, where her parents both earned their doctorate degrees. When her father secured a research position at Lincoln University in 1995, they packed up and moved to Christchurch.'

Haneen's mother is a key figure in the Muslim community and has been influential in Haneen's life. Almost from birth, Haneen accompanied her mother everywhere, including to lectures and talks she gave to Muslim women. "There is photo evidence of me as a toddler, sitting on her my mom's lap while she's giving some kind of talk and helping out. She took me along to all of these things. I've grown up with this mother, who's been contributing to the community, so whether I like it or not, it's manifested in my personality."



*Oral Health  
Crusader  
Delivering  
Free Dental  
Care*



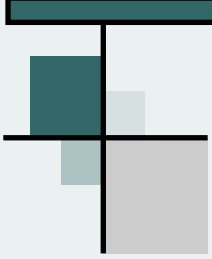
When Haneen came to choose her career path, the decision wasn't easy. To follow her heart and study health science in Dunedin would mean she would have to bear the responsibility of separating her family. "As the only girl in the family, my parents would never let me go to another city by myself so obviously dad was going to come with me," she explains. "I had a complete crisis of conscience at the time thinking it was selfish. I felt guilty that the family would be spilt because of me, so I started to consider other options."

Thanks to the encouragement and support of her older brother and her high school English teacher, Haneen decided to pursue her dream and study health science. It only took one dental lecture for her to realise that she had found her niche: "I realised pretty quickly

that dentistry suits a lot of the talents I have – I was very artistic growing up so I like working with my hands and I have good fine motor skills, so I studied dentistry, and I've been passionate about oral health ever since."

Haneen now lives in Gore where she works for Birch Lane Dental, a not-for-profit dentistry practice. "The coolest part of my job is that I get to do all the fun side of dentistry, instead of just emergency care. Also, I don't have the pressures of trying to bring lots of dollars in – any profit that we make just goes back into the organisation."

Family remains important to Haneen, and she spends her three-day weekend back home in Christchurch. And her charity work? "I hope to continue doing as much of that as I can in the coming years."



# Momina Saeed

Support worker & Sign Language interpreter in training

**M**omina Saeed has a foot in many different communities. Canadian born and raised, her parents and grandparents were born in Fiji, and her great-grandparents were born in India. Now, through her husband, she's part of te ao Māori. And, through her work, she is involved in the Deaf community and disability community.

"I identify with the Muslim and Islamic community, the Canadian community, the Fijian community, the Deaf and disability communities, and to the Māori community because my husband is Māori," says the 31-year-old.

Momina describes her husband as her "biggest cheerleader", providing support when she needs it and pushing her to do better.

The eldest of four children, with a younger sister and two brothers, Momina grew up surrounded by a large extended family. Since coming here seven years ago, she has been embraced by her New Zealand whānau.

One of her best memories on a marae is visiting for a family reunion. "We slept there and

hung out with the family, got to know each other better and learned about the family history. We even got a big bus and toured all the different places the family is connected to."

Looking back on her childhood, Momina appreciates the role her grandparents played in teaching her about her past. "As an adult I now realize how important it was that I knew my grandparents and great-grandparents. I learnt so much from them. We need to appreciate the elderly in our families, connecting with them, talking to them while they're here with us about our family history, culture, language and religion."

It was Momina's great-grandmother who held a special place in her heart. Momina fondly remembers spending time with her in the holidays and taking care of her when she became sick. She credits these experiences with her desire to help people, which has formed the basis of her career.

After finishing high school in Canada, Momina studied a diploma in special education and then worked for five years in schools. When she came to New Zealand, she easily found similar work in Auckland.

*A foot in many different communities*

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However, Momina wanted to add more value than the school system allowed. “In schools people with disabilities are taught math, science and reading. That makes sense for those who want to go to university, but there are many disabled people with different needs.”

Momina now works for Geneva Healthcare as the Deaf and Disability Support Services Manager. In this role she helps people in the community achieve their aspirations, no matter what they are.

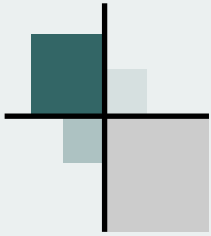
“I want to make sure everyone can live their life to the fullest the way they want to, not the way some system says they should. If they want to paint or socialize or go to the rugby game with their friends or get a job or study at university, then that’s what they should do. We are here to work with their different abilities and guide and assist them to achieve their goals and live their best life.”

The work is hugely rewarding: “The joyous part of my work is seeing the people that I work with live their life to the fullest and enjoy doing what they do. They have so many challenges, but they’re happy, smiling and loving life. It’s humbling.”

Momina is currently studying part-time to be a sign language interpreter. All going to plan, she will be the first Muslim New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) interpreter when she graduates in a couple of years. As well as interpreting English to NZSL and vice versa, she will also learn Islamic signs, which are currently being developed by a group of Muslim Deaf.

Not only will this new skill enhance her work practices, but it will bring two of her communities closer: “I want to use interpreting to be involved more with the Muslim community, and to connect the Deaf community and the Muslim community together,” she says.





# Aliya Danzeisen

Leader, Teacher, Lawyer & Step-Mother

**W**ith a mother who was ‘strong and driven’, Aliya Danzeisen grew up knowing ‘girls could do anything’. Not only has she proved this in her own life, she’s now helping empower the next generation of Muslim women through her work with the Islamic Women’s Council of New Zealand.

The youngest of three daughters, Aliya grew up on a dairy farm in a small town in the US state of Michigan. Her mother was a school-teacher, who later became a town councilor and then mayor, her father was a dairy farmer.

“When our family faced challenges, mum found solutions, including providing for us financially. There were certain things she wouldn’t let us fail at. She just outright said, ‘you’re going to do this.’ And there was no question that we were going to university.”

Aliya first qualified as a high school teacher and then as an attorney, working for a legal firm in Miami, Florida, contesting large corporate bankruptcies in court. She’s travelled widely, living in Japan and South America, and speaks both Japanese and Spanish. “People are often astonished hearing me speak languages they don’t associate with a woman wearing a hijab,” she says.

Although she grew up in a Christian family, Aliya chose to become a Muslim as an adult and converted to Islam in 2001. It was four months before the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York, which caused her to take stock of her life and rethink her career. It also led to her decision to give up practicing law, at times all-consuming, and reinvent herself as a teacher.

Now, living in Hamilton with her husband and three stepchildren, Aliya is a Spanish teacher and head of department at Hillcrest High School. She’s a passionate teacher and believes the education sector must reflect our cultural diversity.

“Most people don’t understand the depth of diversity in the Muslim community. Muslims come in every shape, form and language. When people see a headscarf, they usually assume the person is from the Middle East, but I’m of European descent. Diversity is strength,” she says.



*Girls Can Do  
Anything!*

She well remembers looking for a job when there was a shortage of teachers and the newspapers were 'literally running advertisements saying that only New Zealand-born teachers would be considered.'

"Highly qualified skilled people were coming into the country, and yet their hiring policy was to limit students to one world experience, rather than offering them a chance to be adaptable in multiple worlds," she says

Within two years of arriving in New Zealand, Aliya was asked to help build a community programme for Muslim women in Hamilton, and soon afterwards to help the Islamic Women's Council. She hasn't looked back, recently becoming the Council's national coordinator.

Together with others, Aliya has been instrumental in developing and strengthening the Council, which was established when the Muslim community in New Zealand was small. The community has now grown to about 60,000, with 65% under the age of 30. Consequently, as well as running the annual conference, a lot of the Council's focus has involved building up youth networks, providing practical programmes and building a retreat facility for Muslim women. "We've been setting up the structures to prepare the organisation for the future New Zealand, and I'm so proud of that," she says.

"We gave young Muslim women opportunities to build resilience and attend leadership training, and they now define themselves as leaders."

Advocacy for women, in the Muslim community, at a New Zealand government level and internationally, has been another important focus for Aliya. "Much of what we do is try to make it easier for people to access their rights and be treated equally," she says.

Other, all-consuming tasks have been: preparing the council's substantial, high profile response to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch mosques attacks in 2019 and supporting and advocating for Muslim women after the attacks.

"Women need to be able to stand on their own financially, emotionally and physically. It doesn't mean that they should, but they need to be able to do that, so in times of challenge and loss, they can hold their ground. Since the Christchurch attacks, Muslim women have had to pick up and support their families and teach their children on their own," she says.

And the biggest lesson she's learnt in life?

"Two wrongs never make a right," she says. "There have been times, even in relation to the mosque attacks, where I could have struck back and hurt people, either by my tongue or by career. I've chosen not to because it wasn't the right thing to do. It's okay to address issues, but to be rude and mean, to undermine others or do something wrong, to get what you want, is not right."



IWC<sup>★</sup>NZ