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A Rich Life Indeed

Fatuma Hirsi Mohamed is a pioneer Strathmore Business School MBA student. She is Nation Media Group's Corporate Affairs Manager and Chairman of Public Relations Society of Kenya. Below is a question and answer interview on family, work, studies and religion.

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Tell us about yourself?

I am married with four children. One of my kids is already at university. I believe I am a competent manager trained in languages, communications and with work experience in international and public relations. I am currently the Corporate Affairs Manager, Nation Media Group.

Socially, I am a member of Karen Golf and Country Club where I spend time with my family. We engage in many activities both sports and recreational and I play golf. Imagine a hijab wearing woman on the golf course! I also try as much as possible to spend weekends with my family since I spend so much time at work and now studies and such outings help me balance my life - career, studies and family.

I am a member of several professional bodies. I am the current Chairman of the Public Relations

Society of Kenya, Vice-President of the East Africa Public Relations Association, member of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), board member of the Advertising Standards Board and member of the Marketing Society of Kenya.

I am a governing council member of the Nairobi Central Business District Association (a lobby group that enhances the business environment in the capital city) and board member in Computers for Schools Kenya project (which aims at giving access to IT to rural schools through computer donations and training.) I am also an Advisory Council member of AMREF Kenya.

How do you manage to balance between work, family and studies?

It's easy to get lost and overwhelmed in the chaos, responsibilities and goals of life. Once overwhelmed, it's

tempting to forget about and postpone that which is most near and dear to our hearts. I've found that it's helpful to keep asking myself what's really important.

I have found that if you regularly take a minute to check in with yourself, to ask yourself "What's really important?" you may find that some of the choices you are making are in conflict with your own stated goals. This custom of asking myself what is really important every morning helps me align my actions and encourages me to make more conscious and loving decisions.

Also as a woman, I am wired to multi-task and so I guess it may be harder in the long run but we have been blessed with that capacity. Remember, a woman can be some or all of the following - mother, wife, friend, daughter, employee, chef, nurse, tailor, event organizer,

chaperone, counselor, teacher etc & you get the gist.

What advice would you give professionals who say they don't have time to pursue further studies?

My answer above really says that you must learn to appreciate who you are and once you know what you are aiming for, you can manage your time and achieve all you desire within the limited time. It just needs constant reminder of what is really important to you as an individual.

Why did you chose the Strathmore MBA programme considering there are many other MBA programmes in town?

Three years ago, I started a 3 year distance-learning MBA with Warwick Business School (one of the best in the world) and after the first year, I was stressed out, burned out and

gave up (the first time in my life that I started something and left it halfway). However, I promised myself that I would attain my dream of getting an MBA and I realized that I needed to have a classroom situation with a lecturer and the support system of other students and so I decided to try the Strathmore one. I seem to like being in pioneer classes as I also was in the first postgraduate diploma in PR class for Kenyatta University.

You have been in the programme for two months. What has been your experience so far? Is it adding value to your work already? Is it meeting your expectations? Any pleasant surprises? And what would you like to be improved?

I am thoroughly enjoying the classes and I can now better understand the concepts that I was trying to learn on my own when I was doing the

distance learning one. I am also glad that we have class syndicates, which are study groups. They help us all assist each other as we have different knowledge and strengths.

In terms of adding value, it certainly has and I am using some of the knowledge to improve my work. I also am very pleased with the added value of having guest lecturers of such high standards who make us understand management concepts so easily with simple language and everyday occurrences. We are also getting to see the impact of the subjects we are being taught in corporate and national growth as we are doing with the HR subject. I thank Dr. Gakuru for his interesting stories and for making us enjoy his classes while learning. He says we learn something new every day and I do so agree with him on that.

Muslim women make about 4% of Kenya's population. Being used as you are to Kenya's corporate scene, are you conscious of the uniqueness of your gender and religion in your class?

Yes, I am very conscious of my religion and gender. Coming from an ethnic group, the Somali, that is pastoralist in nature and that live in harsh semi-desert terrain in North-eastern Kenya, the education of children is often overlooked and especially that of the girl-child. I am therefore fortunate to have parents with vision that invested in my education as much as they did in my brothers.

Being in the Public Relations field, I am in the public eye and there being such few visible Somali and even Muslim women in a predominantly Christian country, I take it upon myself to be a mentor and role model

for the disadvantaged girl-child from my region and take part in activities that profile and encourage these girls to take their education seriously. My involvement as a founder member of Gargaar Kenya, an NGO that aims at bringing together professional women from the region to find best solutions to the education of the girl-child from that region helps me achieve that as does the mentoring of the recipients of an annual UNICEF-Govt of Kenya bursary scheme that takes care of 60 girls from the region to get access to quality education in national schools countrywide.

Because of my faith, I consciously and willingly wear the Muslim dress just as Catholic nuns wear their habits but somehow the Muslim woman is questioned about her mode of dress and this makes me do so even more if only to show that 'a dress doth not maketh a woman'. I have been asked why I dress the way

I do and my answer is always that it doesn't stop me from using my God-given intellect, from working or from interacting with others. I may be wearing a suit underneath my buibui and this gives me confidence, which comes across no matter what you are seeing as the outer clothes. My dress has not stopped me from achieving my goals and I thank the companies that saw my worth and not the outer cloth and gave me the chances they did.

You have studied at two of Kenya's public universities and you are a top executive at Nation Media Group, a blue chip company in the country. What has been your experience as regards gender and religion in Kenya's education and corporate sector?

I think that if people are given equal opportunity, most of us have the potential to excel but perhaps the

development or underdevelopment of certain regions due to political exigencies hurt the youth more than anything. Personally, I was blessed to have gone to good schools and I worked hard to make it for further studies and work my way up the corporate ladder. At my current place of work, we are not too many at the top, genderwise, but the opportunities are there and we just have to work double smart and hard to move up.

St. Josemaria, the inspiration behind Strathmore University stressed that Strathmore should be open to people of all races, religion and social class. As a former student of Kianda College and current student at Strathmore University, is this openness being lived in these institutions?

I did a bilingual secretarial course at Kianda college after my A levels

many moons ago and the skills I learnt then are still in use today; I am able to type pretty fast (when that assignment is almost overdue), counseling, office practice and sociology - all of them are pretty handy in my everyday life.

I really appreciate the courtesy accorded to me by Strathmore Business School (SBS). The staff members are polite and very helpful and accommodating and I believe it is because of the philosophy of the religion. They are also very welcoming to other religions and this must be commended. I wanted to do a MA (Communications) some years back and was denied admission to a certain Kenyan university (that will remain unnamed) because of my religion. I do really appreciate Strathmore's inclusiveness.

What advice do you have for undergraduate students aspiring to join the corporate world?

The first degree really only gets your foot in the door and if you realize that early on, you are probably very likely to change careers somewhere along the line. Perhaps it would be easier to choose a degree that you enjoy and then specialize later in your postgraduate studies. I have also learnt that learning never ends and you can do it all your life if you so wish, so don't limit yourself (wish I knew that when I started off, I would probably have taken nuclear physics for a first degree. Just kidding.)

Anything else you would like to say?

Have a personal goal and learn to enjoy life - simple things, great happiness. Thank you Strathmore for starting this MBA class. I have utmost

confidence that it will become a much sought after degree and we shall do our bit to make sure that we don't let you down by working hard and bringing in good grades. (Pssst, & don't set very hard exams so that we can help each other.)

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