

*The text below is a translation of the Malay original, which appeared in Berita Harian, pg 3, on Monday, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2010*

## **Dilemma of a Blind Muslim Housewife Who Is Afraid to Leave Her Home Even With Her Cane**

By NUR'ADILAH MAHBOB

adilaham@sph.com.sg

Darkness began to envelope the world of freelance writer Sherriza Hareani Jalil a decade ago.

Sherriza, 41, was diagnosed as having a condition called retinitis pigmentosa, which robbed her of her vision.

“At that time, I became paralyzed with fear and couldn’t even turn on the computer,” says Sherriza.

Till now, Sherriza is afraid to leave her home even with a cane. However, this may change if she owns a guide dog.

“By using a guide dog, I may be more confident and be more daring to step out of the house,” says Sherriza, who is married.

This housewife once worked as a masseuse at the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH).

While she is considering using a guide dog, her main fear is how the community, especially the Malay/Muslim community, will accept it.

The only user of a guide dog in Singapore, Mr Kua Cheng Hock, says although the government has made many accommodations with respect to the law, public awareness is still inadequate, especially amongst service providers.

This issue becomes even more sensitive when it involves the Malay/Muslim community, even more so when he and his guide dog, Kendra, appear at halal-certified food outlets.

“Sometimes, it is not Malays who oppose but the non-Malay shop owners who do so for fear their Muslim customers will get offended,” says 55-year-old Mr Kua.

According to Mr Kua, he once tried to go to a halal restaurant in Tampines but was rejected.

“Since using Kendra, I go out of the house more often and unlike before, when I only went out when I needed to.

“As a result, I get to interact more with my neighbours and I also feel healthier,” says Mr Kua, who is now active in encouraging the blind to get a guide dog through the Guide Dogs Association of the Blind.

Mr Kua hopes that through his efforts, the Malay/Muslim community will be able to accept the presence of guide dogs for use by visually-impaired Muslims.

“If non-Malays are able to be sensitive towards the needs of the Malay minority, Malays, too, should be sensitive towards the needs of the smaller minority such as the blind,” says Mr Kua.

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### **Islam Permits Use of Guide Dogs**

Visually-impaired Muslims are allowed to own guide dogs, explained Ustaz Firdaus Yahya, a committee member of the management of the Madrasah Tahfiz Al-Quran, Radin Mas Religious School.

He stressed that although Islam forbids the owning of dogs, this becomes permissible if there is a special need such as for the purposes of hunting and as guide dogs for the blind.

The issue here, points out Ustaz Firdaus, is, in the case of dogs, what is considered najis (classified as something which, when touched, renders one unfit for prayer).

According to mazhab Shafie (the Shafie School of Thought), a dog and whatever is of the dog are considered najis berat or major najis.

As such, a Muslim person's body and any objects that have been in contact with a dog has to be cleansed (sertu) by washing the exposed area seven times. One of these seven times involves using a mix of water and clean earth.

However, there are several differing opinions regarding this matter.

Imam Malik and Imam Abu Hanifah (The Malik and Abu Hanifah Schools of Thought) are of the opinion that dogs are not najis except for their saliva and only if a Muslim's body and objects are exposed to a dog's saliva would these need to be cleansed (sertu).

However, both mazhab Maliki and Hanafi (Maliki and Hanafi Schools of Thought) are of the opinion that even the saliva of dogs which are kept for the purposes of hunting and as guide dogs for the blind is not considered najis.

This means that a Muslim's body and any objects that have been in contact with a dog's saliva do not have to be cleansed with a mixture of water and earth (sertu) and can simply be washed with water or using soap to replace earth.

Hence, said Ustaz Firdaus, a blind person who needs to have a guide dog can do so, according to mazhab Maliki and Hanafi, more so if the need for cleansing (sertu) is too difficult for the blind person.

"This is in line with the guidelines of fiqah (study of Islamic laws pertaining to ritual obligation) which state that should something become burdensome, the syarak (requisites of Islamic canon law) will be eased to lighten that burden," said Ustaz Firdaus.

However, a Muslim should not abuse this easing of rules, Ustaz Firdaus emphasized.