

Much more to Venezuela

A window into Venezuela and its Muslim women is showcased in a beautiful photo exhibition, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

VENEZUELA, officially called the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, is located on the northern coast of South America. It ranks second as the country that has seen seven women crowned as Miss Universe.

Mina Perez, 40, second secretary at the Venezuelan embassy in Malaysia is puzzled that Malaysians would know this. She says: "I also can't understand the obsession that Malaysians have with telenovelas."

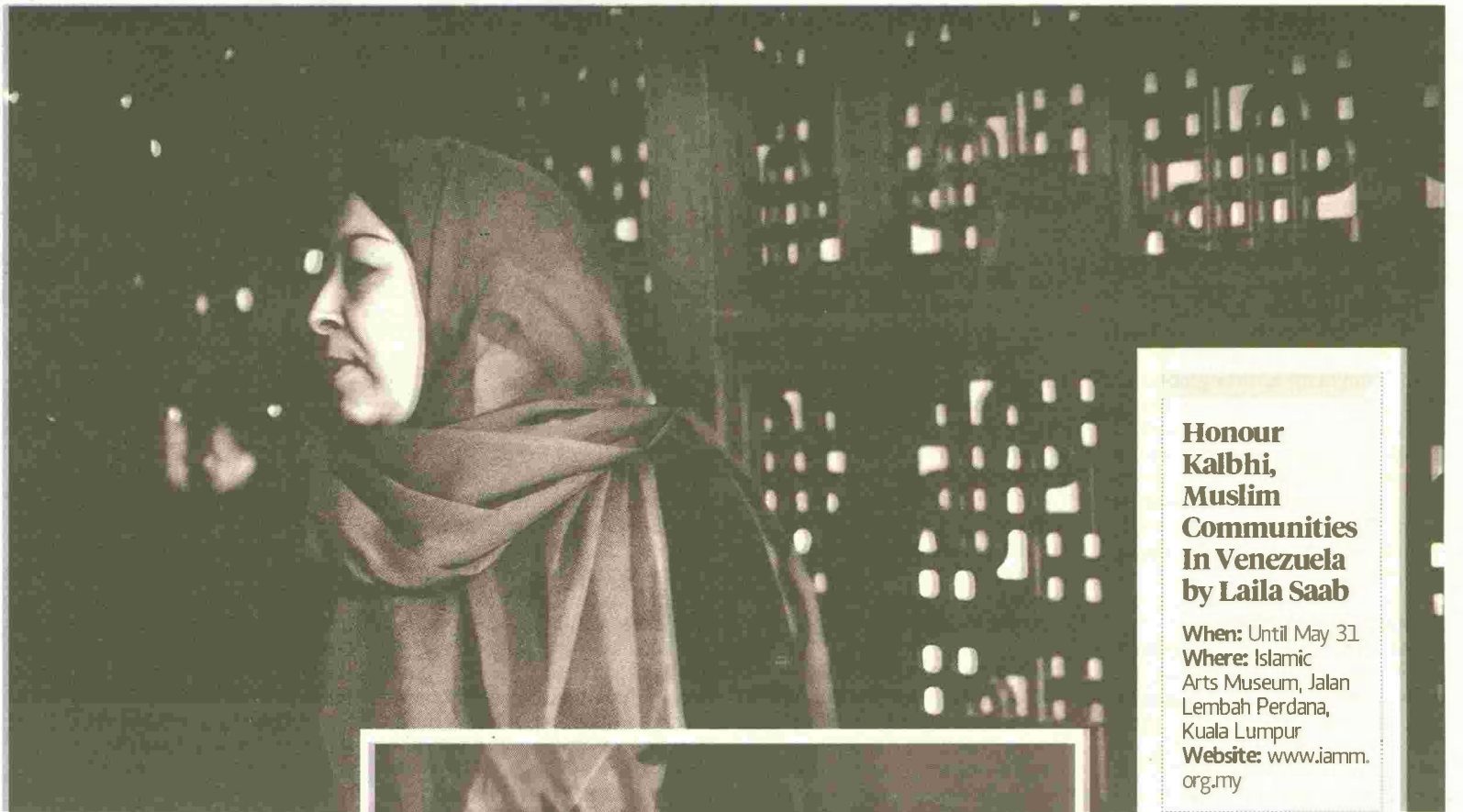
She says there is so much more to Venezuela. She points to us and says: "You know, I could say that all three of you are Venezuelan." Of the curator at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, she says: "You could be of Arab descent." Turning to me and the photographer, she adds: "You would be from the Caribbean and you of indigenous American descent. You see, many of the people who came to South America were running away from conflicts all over the world like the Spanish Inquisition."

It's all these people — the indigenous Americans, Spanish, Africans, Arabs, Portuguese, Indians and Germans — who have resulted in Venezuela having an extremely varied racial population. One aspect of such diversity is currently being showcased in the museum in a photo exhibition called Honour Kalbhi, Muslim Communities In Venezuela. It's a collection of photographs by Laila Saab that feature Muslim women in Venezuela.

Mina then puts into words what we're wondering: Is there a sizeable Muslim population in Venezuela? "Our population is similar to that of Malaysia — we have about 30 million people. But we don't know how many people are Muslim, or Catholic or Hindu or any religion for that matter. It's not something that has been taken into account in our census. We are more worried about the socio-economic status of the citizens rather than what religion they practise. That's a private matter."

Indeed, the official documentation for the exhibition states that the freedom to practise one's religion enshrined in Venezuela's Constitution facilitates the friendly, open attitude of its people towards each other.

"I was never brought up with this knowledge about race and religion. In fact, the first time someone asked for my race was when I went to the



Honour Kalbhi, Muslim Communities In Venezuela
by Laila Saab

When: Until May 31
Where: Islamic Arts Museum, Jalan Lembah Perdana, Kuala Lumpur
Website: www.iamm.org.my



Mina Perez wants to show that there's so much more to Venezuela.



Little Girl Wearing A Scarf.



Dusk, a captivating picture of people in prayer.

US for the first time. I was 18 years old," says Mina. "A man asked me if I was black or white. Then he thought I was Asian. I said to him I was Latino. Then he decided I was from Mexico. I wanted to tell him that there was more to South America than just

Mexico. But this was 20 years ago in Arkansas."

Fast forward a few years and it was only when she arrived in Malaysia eight years ago that someone in the bank asked her what religion she practised.

"In Venezuela, no one will ask you what your religion is. If you ask someone this question, they'll probably laugh at you. I mean, I can tell you that in my family, we have a little Jewish blood, a little Moorish blood and one of my cousins married a Japanese. We say we're Roman Catholic. And my sister is a Buddhist."

There is no doubt, however, that the photographer in this exhibition, Laila, is Muslim. She was born in a place called Cabimas in Venezuela. Her father was Syrian and her mother, Venezuelan. Laila spent her childhood in Syria, but returned to Venezuela to study art, graphic design and photography at the university.

Mina adds: "Maybe because she's Muslim, Laila was able to go to that part of the mosque where the women pray and capture their world and what they do."

She points to one of the untitled photographs and says: "Look at this one. Here's a mother teaching her

daughter how to wear the scarf. It reminds me of a Venezuelan family who used to live in KL. They embraced Islam, got married and had a child. That child looks like this little girl. They have gone back now."

Walking to the photograph with the title Dusk, she continues: "I like this photo very much. It's taken inside a mosque and we would hardly ever see it. We're not curious about another religion and wouldn't go inside a mosque. So, I like this one because it shows people in prayer."

Moving on quickly, she stands before a set of three photographs. There's reverence in her voice when she says: "These three photos of one woman, I'd put in my house. I imagine what this woman is like. She probably has a deep voice and is someone people go to for advice. She's the kind of woman who can make your future bright. She looks powerful, but in a quiet way. She also looks like someone who has been through a lot in life. She has cried many tears, but she's not weak."

Introducing the next photograph, she says that the weather in Venezuela tends to be similar to that of Malaysia. "Since Laila is from Zulia State, which is very hot, this photo was probably taken when it was hot. And these three women are waiting to pray. Maybe they're gossiping about the men in their lives. There's no polygamy in Venezuela but our divorce rate is growing and it's very high — more than 50 per cent."

Finally, Mina explains that the photographer called the exhibition Kalbhi because it's a term of endearment. "When using the word kalbhi, Laila was honouring her father and it's also what she calls her son."