

A thoroughly MODERN ROYAL

IN A RARE EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH *EMIRATES WOMAN*, HER ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCESS HAYA BINT AL HUSSEIN OPENS UP TO *LYNDSEY STEVEN* ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA, THE PERSONAL LOSS OF HER MOTHER, THE ADMIRATION SHE HAS FOR HER FAMILY, HER VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND WHY SHE DOESN'T CONSIDER HERSELF A FEMINIST

"I have been reading a book, which I strongly recommend you read, called *Cast Away* by Charlotte McDonald-Gibson describing stories of survival from Europe's refugee crisis," says HRH Princess Haya. "It forces you to digest the completely unimaginable decisions that some human beings in our world are being forced to make," She continues, "like saving one of their children and allowing the second to drown, or risking imprisonment and torture to try and find a better life for your family, or even entrusting your life and members of your family to people smugglers. The fact that there are so many millions of desperate people in our world that have to face appalling choices for a variety of different reasons is a call to all of us to do our part."

It's a hard-hitting opener, but it's an honest and heartfelt one. HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein does not, after all, have to impress anyone with light-hearted gambits. She may be the daughter of the late King Hussein of Jordan and the wife of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, but HRH Princess Haya, 42, is more well known for Her inexorable humanitarian efforts as well as Her pioneering contributions to the world of equine sports.

HRH Princess Haya commands the space around Her, not in a domineering way but in a manner that compels and excites. She's got fabulous personal style – Her long flowing hair, Her voice, Her natural iridescence, Her sparkling, all-inclusive smile and Her clothes; with fitted shift dresses in vibrant colours, crisp blue Oxford shirts, black jeans and a seriously snappy collection of hats among Her sartorial staples. She's also a fan of ornately-embroidered and brightly coloured kaftans, but rarely wears a hijab. Her style icons are Her late mother, HM Queen Alia of Jordan, HM Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Diana, for their timeless elegance, their sensitivity to cultures and their sense of occasion.

Born and raised in Jordan, educated in the UK (spending time at Badminton and Bryanston where She gained five A-levels before going on to read politics, philosophy and economics at St Hilda's, Oxford) and now the wife of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who She married in 2004, She bridges East and West with pure sophistication.

As the Chairperson of Dubai's International Humanitarian City – the world's largest and busiest logistics hub for humanitarian aid – HRH Princess Haya is well versed when it comes to discussing the humanitarian issues that weigh down the world today, insitng that one of the most atrocious human tragedies since World War II

is the humanitarian crisis stemming from the Syrian conflict. "The inextricably linked ethnic, religious and political issues that have created this issue are something that world leaders need to urgently address," She declares.

Since the Syrian crisis began in 2011 the UAE has extended residency permits to more than 100,000 Syrian nationals, bringing the total number of Syrian nationals living in the UAE to more than 242,000. Over the past five years, the UAE has provided more than US\$750 million (Dhs2.75 billion) to support Syrian refugees, mainly in neighbouring countries that are facing considerable pressure. The saddest thing of all, HRH Princess Haya points out, is how many humanitarian tragedies have to compete with each other for the world's attention. "There are so many that are overshadowed, or ignored. It's impossible for me to tell you that one humanitarian crisis is bigger or more important than another because every single human life is of equal value and every senseless loss is a scar on our collective humanity."

As a UN Messenger of Peace and the winner of WFP's Hunger Hero Award, Her ultimate goal is to cut hunger and poverty worldwide. "Hunger and malnutrition persist, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa and among women and children and minorities. We need to expand social safety nets and food assistance globally. Without proper nutrition, children fail to develop mentally and physically and they will always lag behind. I simply cannot understand – nor will I accept – that in our world today we can say we are civilised

and advanced and yet still there are children who die terrible deaths every minute because they have nothing to eat," She laments.

Her work comes from the heart and this is recognised by dignitaries across the world. As former United Nations Secretary General His Excellency Kofi Annan once highlighted: "She doesn't do it with bravado or lots of publicity." HRH Princess Haya had impressed Mr Annan on a trip to Kenya when She visited victims of ethnic violence before meeting with the President. The respect is mutual, with HRH Princess Haya naming Kofi Annan as one of the most inspiring people She's met. Out of all the fascinating people She's encountered, including Nelson Mandela and Muhammad Ali, She is still most in awe of HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. "Every day I am amazed by the things He does. Every single day I thank God that I am lucky enough to be close to Him," She says of Her husband. HRH Princess Haya also expresses admiration for HM Queen Elizabeth II, Princess Diana and "Mother of the Arabs" Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak. For it is women, HRH Princess Haya categorically believes, who



HRH PRINCESS HAYA BINT AL HUSSEIN WITH HER HUSBAND HIS HIGHNESS SHEIKH MOHAMMED BIN RASHID AL MAKTUUM

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HRH PRINCESS HAYA VISITS THE FAMILY VILLAGE, A HOME FOR ORPHANED CHILDREN IN DUBAI

need to be the harbingers of a sea change. "Women need to realise their strength. So many great women before us and among us have suffered greatly to carve a place for us in modern society that is today better than yesterday and will be better yet tomorrow if women are allowed to achieve their potential."

While women are powerful, She stresses they need to be empowered. "The UN Humanitarian Aid Agencies and many NGOs have found that assistance given directly to poor women in field projects is used much more effectively. Targeting aid to women in developing countries is really critical."

She is also passionate about issues closer to home – and to Her heart. "Losing my mother at the young age of three has made the plight of orphans very important to me. Children brought up in a loving environment have much to offer the world and sadly, through no fault of their own, too many children are orphaned. Concentrating on making their lives better is something I really want to draw light to."

The moving black-and-white photograph of HM Queen Alia of Jordan gazing devotedly at a then three-year-old HRH Princess Haya is even more poignant given that HM Queen Alia was tragically killed in a helicopter crash shortly after the picture was taken. With HM Queen

Alia dressed down in a chambray shirt and straw hat and HRH Princess Haya in a soft white smock top, for the two of them, in that moment, no one else existed.

Along with Her focus on improving the lives of disadvantaged and disabled children, there are also health issues that HRH Princess Haya wants to draw attention to, in particular cancer, because: "It has touched so many people I love. There are too many more I know who are fighting it now and that is one battle I want to help fight."

Unhealthy eating habits also hit a raw nerve. "Last year it was reported that almost 20 per cent of the UAE population suffer from diabetes and that the obesity rate in the UAE is double the world average. Education is critical. We need to create an environment that encourages people – especially young children – to adopt long-term healthy eating behaviours and exercise regularly."

It is clear that Her daughter HH Sheikha Al Jalila bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, (who turns nine in December) and son HH Sheikh Zayed bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, now four, are benefiting from their parents' energetic example, with Instagram posts on both HRH Princess Haya and HH Sheikh Mohammed's accounts showing candid snaps of the children enjoying the great outdoors, practicing falconry and learning how to cook wholesome Bedouin-style meals in the desert. This is what HRH Princess Haya does for fun. ➤

A THREE-YEAR-OLD HRH PRINCESS HAYA (RIGHT) IS TODAY THE SPITTING IMAGE OF HER LATE MOTHER HM QUEEN ALIA OF JORDAN



"I enjoy falconry, shooting and all water sports. I also love driving fast cars! My all-time favourite is the Aston Martin."

For the record, in Jordan, She is the only woman licensed to drive heavy trucks.

As a woman of our times, HRH Princess Haya has embraced social media (follow her on Instagram @hrhprincesshaya), but Hers is a low-key presence that safeguards the symmetry between family and public life.

"In this communication age it is difficult for every member of society to find the right balance. There is huge danger when a person begins to sell him or herself – it is such a slippery slope. It puts an incredible amount of pressure on a person to keep reinventing themselves in ways that are unnatural." So how does She keep it classy?

"Finding the confidence to accept who you are and what you stand for gives you a critical mass of yourself that you are not willing to change to please others." Bids for popularity are blatantly not HRH Princess Haya's thing.

Having pursued a full-time career as an equestrian athlete in Her 20s – Her oeuvre is diverse – HRH Princess Haya is the first woman to represent Jordan in international equestrian sport and the only woman to win a medal in the Pan-Arab Equestrian Games. She strongly encourages all young women to be active. "Sport helps strengthen a young woman's identity and build a strong character. It also enforces discipline, exposes Her to being competitive and a team player. It is key to a healthy mind and body."

Her equestrian prowess has been demonstrated both on and off the field. In Her eight years as president of the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) from 2006 to 2014, HRH Princess Haya challenged stiff royal stereotypes by stirring things up. Winning the presidency in the organisation's first ever contested presidential race, Her no-nonsense approach ruffled some feathers and eventually led to Her being challenged in a re-election bid. She overcame the challenge in style, winning over 75 per cent of the vote and quietly yet decisively silencing Her critics.

She may be a trailblazer but She is quick to point out that She is not a feminist, believing there is a place in society for both men and women – where neither have to compete. She quotes the late Sheikh Zayed, founder of the UAE: 'The woman is half of the society and any country which pursues development should not leave Her in poverty or illiteracy. I am on the woman's side.'

"The leadership in the UAE, especially Dubai," continues

HRH Princess Haya, "has created an atmosphere that encourages the empowerment of women. And honestly, it isn't an illusion – His Highness Sheikh Mohammed has always said that 'a place without women is a place without spirit.'"

When asked to explain the secret to Her happy 12-year marriage She laughs: "He is the secret, I am far from perfect, but He puts up with me!"

While resolutely upbeat about the support and respect that women receive in the UAE workplace, She concedes that there are steps to be taken with issues like maternity leave. "I add my voice to calls for longer maternity leave periods. I believe that being able to fulfill this treasured time with your newborn child properly is, ultimately, the only way that will allow you to return to the workplace as a solid contributor. I have absolute confidence that in the hands of women's greatest advocate, Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, an excellent solution will be found."

Her answer to which of the UAE's achievements She is most proud of is a simple: "I'm honoured to be a citizen of the UAE," before adding: "I know your readers will be far more interested

if I tell you that once I asked nearly this same question to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed. I asked: 'If the late Sheikh Zayed and the late Sheikh Rashid (may they rest in peace) were to come back to visit you tomorrow and you had to pick one achievement, what would you show them?' I wondered whether He'd tell me about the mega-projects, or the tall buildings. But He instead said, 'I would show them what we have managed to plant in the desert, the vegetables, the foods, the things that we have needed throughout the ages to nourish our people. We faced terrible poverty as a nation and I know that providing for the nation would be the most important thing they would want to see, because all the rest comes after that. People come first.'"

It's a touchingly humble way to round off proceedings, but HRH Princess Haya is not quite finished. As a final farewell She leaves *Emirates Woman* readers with Her very own prescription for a happy, fulfilled and veracious life. "Never waiver or compromise in your own faith and beliefs, but be tolerant. Never judge others and always have respect. Love totally and be honest with yourself and the world."

"Remember," She concludes, "that above all else we are all born free and that no one can put you in a cage except yourself." ■

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