

FIVE QUESTIONS: Hamilton doctor nominated for Canada's Muslim Woman of the Year

By [Carmela Fragomeni](#) Staff Reporter
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Dr. Aliya Khan, director of the calcium disorders clinic at the McMaster University Medical Centre and a professor at the university, has been nominated for a Muslim Award for Excellence (MAX) to be presented at a gala in Toronto on Oct. 14.

Khan, who was born in India but raised in Ottawa, is in such demand for her expertise that patients from across Canada are sent to her. Americans also have sought out the clinic in the past, but are no longer accepted because the waiting list is too long.

Khan lives in Oakville and also has a practice there. She is involved in the Hamilton and Halton communities, having spoken at city mosques, and regularly speaks at churches and synagogues as well, promoting friendship and understanding.

She will be among some well-known Canadian finalists for a MAX award, including Toronto Maple Leafs centre Nazem Kadri, who has helped raise \$1.5 million for charitable causes.

Khan is credited with more than 200 publications, 400 international lectures and numerous awards for excellence in research, teaching and patient care.

She has also recently built an orphanage and school for more than 200 Syrian refugee girls in Turkey.

The Spectator spoke with Khan and asked her five questions:

How does it feel to be nominated for MAX Woman of the Year?

I'm very honoured, very humbled, and very surprised. Because I think everyone is just trying to do the best they can. I think (the awards will) encourage our youth to strive hard and to know they can achieve.

(They are) especially encouraging for girls of all backgrounds - there is no glass ceiling if they work hard and pursue their passions. Everyone is gifted with special abilities, I believe. It's important for young people to find their special abilities and give back to the community.

What got you interested in your field?

When I was in medical school, I remember seeing the structure of the bone and was so amazed. Amazed by the structure of the skeleton and the function of bone cells and how they communicate with each other - and how they regulate and repair the skeleton. That's why I became interested in bone diseases.

You used your personal savings to build a school and orphanage for Syrian refugee girls in Turkey. Why?

I was really moved by the Syrian children's plight . After seeing the body of little Alan Kurdi (washed ashore from a capsized boat) lying on the beach, it just broke my heart, and I felt I had to do something for the children . It (the school) construction is just being completed now. I am hoping to provide university students to teach them through Skype and to have collaboration with local school boards. I am also working with humanitarian initiatives (there to teach). I also wanted to build the school in memory of my father and mother, who have passed away.

You have spoken to local groups about the role of women in Islam, and as an interfaith leader at synagogues, churches and mosques. Why?

Islam clearly states that men and women are equal. The Qur'an tells men to live with women on a basis of kindness and equity . the Prophet - peace be upon Him - emphasizes the importance of being kind to everyone . and the importance of education for girls and boys. A lot of stereotypes we see in the media do not reflect the teachings of Islam. It's very important to recognize that when we judge a religion, we need to base that on what the teachings of the faith are, rather than the actions of criminals, really . (because) religion can be distorted to suit people's agendas.

As part of the Interfaith Council of Halton, we try to increase knowledge, awareness and friendship. We have really been able to bring our communities together. We realize we have the same core values - and it is beautiful to see that.

You have worked in geriatric medicine. What would you say is the biggest challenge facing our older population today?

I would say that our elderly patient population has a number of challenges and one of the big challenges is the lack of family support. I see that loneliness and depression are big problems . we need to improve and strengthen the family structure . (taking care of our elderly) is a very complex problem and a very difficult problem.