

## SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN A HUMAN-ROBOT RELATIONSHIP

*Shahino Mah Abdullah\**

Recent developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics have further improved the ability of humanoid robots to engage with humans. The increase in their ability and value has led to several initiatives to proffer special rights to such intelligent robots as a means of protection. These efforts have, at the same time, raised questions about the possibility of robots being a part of human society, if not our equals. Confusion primarily revolves around the status of intelligent robots, whether they are property or have other special statuses that may resemble human rights.

For instance, Dr Hussein Abbass, an AI expert at the University of New South Wales, Australia, expressed his astonishment upon hearing that Saudi Arabia had granted citizenship to a robot named Sophia last year. For him, the concept of citizenship is too sacred to be given to a machine. Abbas does not believe human society is ready for citizen robots, especially since there are still ongoing efforts to make AI and autonomous systems more trustworthy. Granting citizenship status to robots, in their current form, would be tantamount to a declaration of trust in a technology that has not been proven reliable. He added that we are yet to have reliable mechanisms to ensure that these intelligent systems will behave ethically in accordance with human moral values. There are at least three further reasons why granting Sophia citizenship is considered premature. First is the matter of identity, as human beings possess unique signatures (such as facial structures, irises and fingerprints) that distinguish them from other humans. Sophia's identity, however, cannot be clearly defined, even though technological identity management protocols could establish hardware identity. Second is the legal question of whether Sophia is subjected to taxes or is able to vote. Third is the issue of social rights—that is, of whether Sophia is allowed to have a relationship and marry a real human, or breed through self-replicating technology, permission to do which could allow her to exceed the human population of a nation.

According to Dr Joanna Bryson from the University of Bath (UK), granting robots citizenship would degrade the concept of human rights. To Bryson, it is unacceptable that one would show an interest in robotic rights while showing a lack of respect for human rights. There is nothing wrong with a robot being a servant, but it would be wrong to let people think that robots are persons with

legal and moral responsibility for their actions. Since robots are designed and wholly owned by us, robots are the property of their owners. In Bryson's book chapter, 'Robots should be Slaves', she concluded that calling a robot a moral agent is not only false but an abrogation of our own responsibility.

Currently, the adoption of AI in industrial and service settings does more than just facilitate operational efficiency. Aside their ability to work, there is increasing demand for robots as sexual objects (sexbots), which has caused public debate. The adoption of AI has revolutionised the growth and market of the sex-robot industry. Their physical traits have become more realistic and many have the ability to hold persistent conversations using AI chatterbot technology. With such advanced features, some people, especially men, have begun to consider robots as alternative domestic partners to real women. This is a worrying trend that has implications for the future. If the demand for sexbots increases and becomes a successful business, the industry could potentially transform the nature of human-robot interaction in society.

This kind of relationship will significantly change the behaviour of future society, especially how men perceive and accept women. For proponents of sexbots, such objects provide health benefits, including helping with sexual dysfunction, safer sex, meeting unfulfilled intimacy needs, and alleviating loneliness. On the other hand, counter arguments include discouraging people from seeking real relationships and increased violence against women stemming from their objectification. However, there are no research findings to support these differential claims. Medical research on the health implications of sexbots, for example, paints a different picture. The medical community currently rejects the clinical use of sexbots since none of the postulated benefits can be empirically tested. The societal impact, however, is potentially alarming since a majority of experts argue that sexbots could lead to social isolation rather than alleviating loneliness. In addition, many believe that the use of sexbots will encourage illicit sexual practices, making them more acceptable and, consequently, changing societal norms.

Diverse views from different disciplines must be considered and space must be given to classical, cultural and religious perspectives. For example, human creation in Islam envisages men and women as partners, friends and protectors of one another. As mentioned in the Qur'an, "O mankind! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women; and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, by Whom you demand one of another (your rights), and (to) the ties of relationship; surely Allah ever watches over you" (An-Nisa 4:1). Besides, men can only lawfully marry women, not animal or objects, which would include robots, "And Allah has made for you from yourselves mates and

has made for you from your mates sons and grandchildren and has provided for you from the good things” (An-Nahl 16:72). These directives are meant to secure human benefit since only a partner of the same kind can provide love and tranquillity leading to the creation of a family unit, “And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought” (Ar-Rum 30:21).

Islamic jurists are of the opinion that humans are free to choose their partners and marry among themselves while observing their rights and responsibilities towards one another. Consequently, marriage between a human and a non-human entity (i.e. a jinn or animal) is not allowed. Among the reasons for the prohibition of such a marriage is that it might lead to confusion and corruption among the Muslims and disturb the legal and ethical structure of the family and society. Muslim history also shows no record of such unconventional marriages, perhaps because they violate the very core principles of human relations in Islam, notably its objective to preserve human benefit and well-being. All of this points to the prohibition of marriage between a human and an intelligent robot. No matter how intelligent a robot is or how much it resembles a real human, the action and outcome of such a marriage will contravene many key Islamic principles.

Moreover, the attempt to recreate animate beings, whether human or animal, contravenes the divine prerogative of God Almighty. This prohibition is based on several hadith, including one narrated by Aishah: “The people who will be most severely punished on the Day of Resurrection will be those who aspire to create like Allah” (Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith no.5954). The owning of robots might also cast a different light on the matter of slavery. For instance, robots might be said to be unjustly subjected to unethical servitude without their consent. Equally, slavery can happen when robot automations take over the jobs of low-skilled workers, eventually causing the labour exploitation of those who are desperate—a form of modern-day slavery. If developments in technology manage to somehow replicate humans in their physiology and intellectual capacity, ethical issues would arise in regard to robot cloning (as opposed to biological cloning). This is despite arguments in favour of such practices, such as making a host (robotic body) in order to upload the consciousness of a deceased person, thus allowing digital immortality. For those who hope to expand the lifespan of their loved ones beyond physical death, robot cloning will be an option. This is suspicious from the Islamic viewpoint, however. And lastly, women could be deprived of the prospects of a lawful marriage by robots. If more and more eligible men turn to robots, the foundations of the family unit as envisaged by shariah will likely be jeopardised.

Muslims are encouraged to pray for a long life, a good wife and family, and more sustenance, but all is subject to a given set of religious and moral principles. Protection of the family unit and progeny (*hifz al-nasl*) is one of the higher objectives (*maqasid*) of shariah. This, too, is likely to be subjected to potential threats by robotic interference. Nevertheless, more and more companies are expressing interest in developing intelligent robots that can engage with our social life, likely changing our societal norms. Accepting intelligent robots as part of us (humanity) will greatly impact upon our society in both good and bad ways. Further deliberation and research is necessary in both the shariah and scientific disciplines to clarify instances of possible conflict with legitimate human interests (*maslahah*) and of whether or not science should be guided by legal and ethical principles—and, if so, what those principles might be.

## Notes

- \* *Shahino Mah Abdullah* is Research Fellow, International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia.