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The Superwoman of my Mother's Dreams

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I turn the television volume up, so the mindless chatter of women on the home shopping network can drown out the sounds of the ambulance sirens outside. Fixated on the intricacies of the latest blow dryer models, I can ignore reality - I'm eight years old and my mother has attempted to kill herself.

My mom is an uneducated immigrant woman from a small village in Pakistan, born in a world which did not understand her schizophrenia and depression. She was married off to a stranger at a young age, but while leaving her entire world behind, she held her head up high. America was the land of opportunity, with a brand new green card she could change her story into anything she wanted. But "the promised land" was not all she had expected it to be. Her husband was abusive, unfaithful, and financially manipulative. Her family washed their hands of her burden. The language unfamiliar, the culture so different, she had never even spoken in front of strange men before! She worked in a hospital on the seedy side of town, moving up from cleaning toilets to pushing a button as an elevator operator. One day she was very proud of being promoted to a desk job, she was now the front desk greeter! She has spent over 30 years watching people in white coats rush around the hospital, too busy to acknowledge her as she served their lunch or cleaned their trash. She saw residents on their first day grow into the heads of their departments. She knew how the chief of surgery liked his burger cooked. But he would never know her name. She was not a part of their world, but to her, they were superheroes who fought mythical battles to save lives, living outside her range of comprehension. They were the most noble of all people - the physicians.

As I've developed in my medical school education, I've found strength and courage by returning to my roots. When medicine became hard and I questioned my dedication, I remembered her story. When I underestimated myself or questioned my abilities, I remembered the look of awe in her eyes at my white coat ceremony. I would not have hesitated to send out a fierce reckoning towards anyone who belittled my seat at the table. I did not watch my mother spend her life subdued and silenced, just to stand by and let a male classmate speak over me. This was non-negotiable.

But that boldness only lasted until my first day of rotations in Emergency Medicine. There I was, standing in the doctor's box, a line my mother could never dream of crossing. White coat ironed and hair tucked in a professional bun, textbooks in one hand and coffee in another. I had spent all night doing flashcards to prepare, wide eyed and eager to prove myself, I was introduced to my attending. As I began to speak, he cut me off to say, "Your name is too hard, I'm going to call you Sunshine."

In the constant movement of the ER, there is no time to reflect or react. Microaggressions build upon themselves until they have strengthened into a norm. Suddenly, I no longer had a name. I no longer had specific talents or qualities. I had been pushed aside as a fierce competitor and the opportunity to nurture my skills was thus eliminated. My job was to stand and smile. No longer was I allowed to introduce myself to patients as "Student Dr. Fariha," as I would get cut off with an "Oh, that's just Sunshine." Laughing along with patients who called me adorable instead of answering my pertinent history questions, I would wonder just how would

I get a letter of recommendation from an attending who doesn't know my name?

The nature of a microaggression is such that it makes you question whether you even have the right to feel marginalized. I'm expected to laugh along when the person in charge of my grade, and therefore my future, not only disregards my intelligence and role in front of the patient, but refuses to acknowledge my existence as a whole. My name was too difficult to pronounce, and thus replaced with a misogynistic, narrow magnification of one aspect of my feminine nature, my pleasantness. I was too ethnic to exist. I was too female to be significant. I began to question whether the strength rooted in my mother's story was in actuality, a weakness. Other students were able to move in this world so fluidly. They were taken seriously, they were given opportunities, their mistakes were eclipsed by the minimum amount of average work they did. They had easier names to pronounce. Maybe I should have muted myself, washed off the smell of tumeric to conform to his tastes until I am small and bland enough for his palate. Maybe I should have stayed focused on the women of the home shopping network.

Yet, the culture of medicine is at a tipping point, and we are a generation of students unafraid of pushing until it all capsizes. We are seeing more women with difficult names on staff lists of hospitals everywhere. But medicine cannot just stop there. Beyond that, it must recognize that our seat at the table was earned, our contributions are valued, our intelligence is respected. We will be addressed by our appropriate titles despite how difficult it rolls of your lazy tongue. No longer are we just the line cooks, the house cleaning staff, the background token minority. I will shout proudly from inside the doctor's box and say, "I am ethnic, I am female, I am going to be a physician - the superwoman of my mother's dreams."

Biography

Fariha Siddiquie is a third year medical student at the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine in Downers grove, IL. She was the president of her school's chapter and rejuvenated AMWA activity by creating training events for treatment of patients with domestic violence, LGBT and other issues. With her masters in public health, she hopes to continue working for underserved ethnicities and minority populations. Her dream is to bring health to the forefront in communities which are casualties of health disparities.