



I never dreamed of being a scientist. Growing up, I never even gave a thought of what scientists did or what they looked like. Actually, until a few years ago, if you had told me to picture a scientist, the first thing that would have come to mind would be one of the evil scientists in animated films who always wanted to take over the world. It was only when I watched the film 'Picture a Scientist' that I realized that until my masters degree, I did not really know what scientists did or how academia worked – I am still learning about the latter. But there was something else that I realized as well: that this systemic and societal discrimination of women was something that had been present in my life even before I joined the ranks of academics.



I grew up in, theoretically-speaking, quite a liberal environment, but there were still some unwritten societal rules that one had to abide by. As a girl I was supposed to learn how to do household chores, because one day I would get married and I would be expected to cook and clean for my husband. I was also told that one of the greatest accomplishments that I could ever have were children. As an only child, however, I was also given the freedom to just do what I wanted – something that I would most likely not have been allowed to do if I had a brother, even with my somewhat liberal parents. But even without a brother, I learned early on that if I could be better than all the boys and men in my family, then I would not be expected to take on these more traditional roles that I was expected to fill. So I became this high-functioning person who would go on to do as much as she could to get the best grades, to be admitted to a “world-class” university – a prime candidate for academia. I do not think I had a free weekend since I was around eight (because of how competitive the Mauritian education system used to be and also because of all the extra work I was doing) until about my mid-twenties. So when I did join academic circles and started doing research (first as a masters student and a research assistant), I have to admit, it felt natural. I was the prime candidate for reinforcing survivorship bias in academia.

But it all changed when I experienced two bombings and an attempted coup in Turkey and when I was still expected to work through all of that to finish my degree so I could eventually go home (and hopefully not miss my own wedding). That was probably the last straw. In the months that followed I made radical changes to myself and my own life. I declined a PhD position I was offered because that meant I would have to be away from my partner for a long period of time and I moved to Germany to be with him. This also meant, at least at the time, giving up on academia and anything I had planned until then. Academia is ruthless in the way that it makes you choose between your career and your family, especially for women – and my priorities were clear.

Ironically, I accidentally fell back into academia a bit more than a year later (but that is a story for another time) and I was determined to be different this time. And I think that is when I realized how uncompromising the system is for people who do not align with the systemic culture of

*\* All photos courtesy of the authors.*



that system, especially for marginalized groups, or how people may perceive someone as being unproductive or lacking passion for their job if they do not work 24/7. It still excludes those who lack mobility or want to be close to their loved ones. The system was designed with a particular group in mind – white men – and they still dominate, especially in powerful positions. But as long as the system works for them, there will be no incentive to change. And that was what was most inspiring but at the same time heart-breaking about the ‘Picture a Scientist’ film: how much effort it took for these women to make themselves heard and what they achieved when they were, but also how long a way we have to go to make science more equitable for everyone.

As for me, I do not think I will ever stop being this high-functioning person, but I have learned and am still learning how to still take time for myself and my loved ones. I am determined to make it work, but if it does not, leaving is also an option.

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