

## A generation by and for audacious femininity

By Ritika Menon

The perceived inferiority of my gender can be distilled to the moment I was nicknamed “princess” at my job as a first responder in a rural town in Texas. My male coworkers thought it was an apt name for me because while I didn’t know how to check the engine oil of the ambulance or change a tire, I was also friendly, emotional, and altogether too feminine. When I consider Dr. Brodsky’s mission of helping women physicians get what they deserve and promote gender equity in medicine, “Femininity” is the word that comes to mind.

I vividly remember when I was 6 years old and my parents got divorced. Divorces weren’t common in India at the time, and despite my parents’ fervent attempts to shield me from the social fallout by enrolling me in boarding school, I peripherally observed the challenges dealt to my mother in comparison to those dealt to my father. She had to struggle to find her footing in society and faced brutal public scrutiny while my father got to be the sad but successful divorcee, wronged by his audacious wife. My father is a good man who never speaks ill against my mother. They remain friendly to this day, not a drop of bad blood between them. So, why was it so much harder for her?

My mother has never been “feminine” in the way that the patriarchy likes to describe the word. She is loud, fun, independent and hard working. When faced with the choice between full time single motherhood or pursuing her dream of earning an MBA after the divorce, she went to Dubai and got her education. Society considered her careless for it, but no one was prouder of her than me. I felt her physical absence, but never an emotional abandoning. She managed to do it all, provide for me and herself. And it was possible because of her inherent qualities as a woman. Her “femininity” allowed her to cultivate a village around us. She built deep and meaningful relationships, she asked for help when she needed it, she defended herself against baseless accusations instead of enduring them and learned to hold her tongue in favor of the greater good otherwise. Her emotionality, intuition and adaptability are her greatest strengths. She succeeded because she is a woman, not despite it.

My mother was raised by one of the angriest women I know. My grandma broke social norms of her time by refusing an arranged marriage and instead marrying a man of her choice. He was a wonderful father but a violent husband. She knew she couldn’t leave as she didn’t have the means or the education to support herself and three children, so she decided to stay but endure no more. “For every hit you land on me, I’ll deliver three,” my mother says she heard my grandma say to him once. Years of abuse took its toll on her, but never her strength. Her goal in life was to get her 2 daughters educated and married so they never struggled the way she did, and to make sure her son was a better man. And she achieved those goals. She has never been the type to suffer gracefully in silence, as was expected of her at the time, and allowed her rage to propel her through a hard life. If she’d succumbed to society’s expectations of a woman’s

reactions, she would've drowned in her violent marriage. But that is not the definition of femininity that she chose to embody, and we're all the better for it.

If my mother and grandmother are two fiery pillars of strength, my aunt is the quiet meadow of wildflowers that grew on the ashes of it all. The youngest of the three siblings, she was quiet, gentle and funny. I spent a lot of time with her as a child in the years my mother was in Dubai and life always felt a little lighter when I was with her. I always thought that it was because she didn't struggle as much as her sister or mother. But as I grew up, I learned that she was not spared the infliction of a man's inferiority complex either. Her first marriage was to a man as violent as her father. After she divorced him, she fell in love and married a man who treasured her softness, but there were years lost to grief that I never witnessed. She held onto her quiet strength and gentleness and persevered through tough times without letting them harden her.

These are the women of my life. They are loud, passionate, angry, soft, gentle, adaptable and ambitious. They have no tolerance for the moments when I don't believe in myself, because if they achieved the life they wanted, that means I can do it too. It is because of them that I resonate with Dr. Brodsky's mission.

Multiple studies over the years have proven that women physicians consistently have better patient relationships and outcomes. Women make healthcare better, and they do it while overcoming gender barriers absent in the path of men. I see the strength in my femininity every time I spend time comforting a nervous patient or holding a baby so the new mom can take a break, and I hope to inspire my future woman colleagues to do the same. As a physician, I will amplify women's voices and address gender-based disparities in diagnoses and management. And as mentor, I want to cultivate a culture that celebrates a woman's loudness and allows her to fully step into her femininity because it is an expression of her inherent strength.

We are thriving in the aftermath of the many battles women before us have won, and our job now is to empower future generations to continue building on their efforts and to have the audacity to be altogether too feminine.