

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

BY

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Ten-year-old me would be incredibly disappointed in me. By now, I should have had a yellow VW Beetle, an apartment in 'the big city' (I was born and raised in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, so 'the big city' could have been literally anywhere but there), two babies, a cat that loved me and was more excited to see me than she was to nap (this is clearly the most unrealistic thing on my wish list), and – of course – I would be THE surgeon in town.

Let me rewind a little bit. Since I was a kid I knew I wanted to be a doctor. I was never told that I couldn't be. And as a child of eleven I learned very quickly that the only things my parents truly cared about were a) how we treated people and b) how seriously we took our education. So, as I would come home every day with a new idea (like telling my mom I wanted to go to the moon), the usual response would be along the lines of 'Great, I'll pack you lunch!'

By the age of fifteen I had graduated from high school and, only a month later, I'd enrolled in and began medical school. My vision was clear: I would have multiple surgical speciality degrees from elite schools and wear a very unique scrub cap that would relax patients (but still make them confident in my operating abilities, of course) and I would always have free time (despite the whole surgeon thing) because I would live free from the humble entanglements of child-rearing and homemaking, and – of course, à la the opening montage of

every early 2000s romantic comedy and *Grey's Anatomy* - everyone who met me would fall madly in love with me.

But then, in my final year of medical school, the Libyan Revolution broke out, and in an effort to ensure women's inclusion in the nation-building process I founded a women's rights organization, the Voice of Libyan Women (VLW). I had done my research and knew that there was this window of opportunity, where if women were around the table, dictating security and services and the foundations of the new state, the long-term inclusion and leadership of women would be ensured. I finished medical school and, instead of searching for surgical specialties, I created national campaigns, delivered TED talks and negotiated global strategies. At almost every turn I was asked where I got my conviction from, as though I shouldn't have it in the first place.

My confidence wasn't shaken until nearly a year after I had launched VLW. I had been having coffee with someone I considered a mentor - an older, white male, who told me in good faith, 'Be very non-threatening, Alaa; don't freely give your opinions,' after I had told him about a heated debate I'd had with a colleague. When I asked what he meant, he elaborated: 'There are going to be four challenges that you're going to come across in your career: your background (Libyan), your faith (visibly Muslim), your gender (a woman),' and then he said with a laugh, 'the last one you're lucky -

Challenges

you'll grow out of it – and that's your age.' |
→ It was the first time I had felt like it didn't matter how hard I worked, how much I applied myself, and that in order for me to 'succeed' I would have to minimize myself to create comfort for others. For the next few months I spoke up less, negotiated my point less – not because of his advice, but because for the first time in my life I wasn't sure if my points or my voice or my suggestions were necessary.]

Months later, I walked into one of my first high-level meetings. Now, to understand how truly excited I was, I would like you all to imagine you're twenty-one. I had spent the days before preparing and when I walked into the room I saw my name, engraved on a wooden nameplate. I took a seat and started pulling out my papers; I had never felt more self-assured, and at that moment a young woman, an intern I would say was my age, maybe a year older, approached me and said, 'Sorry, but that is Dr Murabit's seat, and I hear he is very difficult.' She went on to tell me that I should go sit at the back, alongside the other support staff.

I picked up my notepad and computer and went and sat at the back; now, I don't know how many of you relate to this – when you kind of freeze and have an almost out-of-body experience? I didn't come back up to my seat until my colleagues, noticing I wasn't there, told me to 'move up to the table'.

As I sat there, in the biggest, most important meeting of my life to date, instead of looking at all the points I'd prepared, I felt a little bit embarrassed and angry, thinking up awesome rebuttals like, 'Oh, I should have said that.' I wanted to find the intern and tell her that she was out of line, but as I was looking around the room at everyone beginning to sit at the table they were all much older, predominately white, and predominantly male. I didn't fit into any of those boxes, and I realized that while, yes, she should haven't made any assumptions, the problem is much larger than one intern.

→ She has been taught – by the spaces we all occupy – that the experts don't look or sound like me; that they are older, whiter and male.

That moment shifted a lot of things for me. First, it created some clarity in my very foggy brain – unravelling some of the doubt that had been building there for months. And second, it turned my hyper-perfectionist, competitive, strategy-starved brain on to a bigger challenge: that the only way we can become more inclusive and ultimately more legitimate and successful at ensuring peace, prosperity and women's rights is by ensuring that all people can see themselves at the table, and that young women in particular have role models, mentors and the necessary support and amplification to ensure that we occupy those spaces. It was the reason I started my own mentorship programme – because, often, we can't be what we can't see.

Maxist
Vivi
Materialist

That is not to say that the doubt will disappear, or that imposter syndrome isn't real. I expect I will hold on to doubt until my old age, because I will always be those four things: I will always be the daughter of parents with accents, Muslim Libyan immigrants who left everything and everyone they loved behind to create a better life for me and who gave me a name that, despite being only four letters, people still try to abbreviate and nickname.

I will always be the little girl who grew up believing she could make it to the moon, in a world that still debates whether girls should have an education and whether women should have reproductive rights. A world where little girls believe, from a young age, that boys are naturally more intelligent and capable.

But I also know that if we had more women in the room we could solve a lot more problems.

CLIMATE CHANGE? The most cost-effective and practical ways to combat it are the education of girls, and women's reproductive rights. ✓

PEACE PROCESSES? 90% fail within five years but with the inclusion of women they are thirty-five times more likely to last fifteen years.

ECONOMIC GROWTH? If 10% of the girls in a country are educated they increase the GDP by 2-3%. Women then reinvest 90% of their income into their community (as opposed to men who reinvest 35-40%), spurring local economic growth and social transformation. And when girls receive an education they are less likely to marry young, will have fewer kids and will vaccinate those kids. ✓

So, yes, it has taken me years. And it will probably take me a lifetime more. And while my hands still shake sometimes, and my voice falters, one thing I have never been more sure of is that what others see as your weaknesses, challenges or reasons to 'other' you, are often the very things that made you work twice as hard, read twice as quickly and try twice as much. The time, the effort, the faith, the work, the background, the age, the gender, the family, the experiences, the choices. All of it. They are what made me capable, what made me determined and what make me a leader, and – I would bet my ten-year-old dream yellow VW Beetle – they are what make you a leader as well.

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