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Embracing the F-Word Together: My Mom and Me Swearing by Feminism¹

Activism—a playful, joyful form of activism—has been a central feature of my life, partly because of the way in which my mom and I grew as activists together. Feminism, antiracism, and decolonial forms of activism are foundational in my scholarly work and my daily life. In this piece, I take a light-hearted approach to the ways in which my mom and I took up feminism.

The Parsi community emanates from Persia and has been in South Asia for hundreds of years. In this narrative, I tell stories about my mom, Mahrookh, and me, as we learned about feminism together, on the West Coast of Turtle Island (North America). My mom grew up in India, the youngest with four brothers. Her dad, Nariman Munshi, was so keen to have a daughter that, despite my Granny's insistence on having only two kids, they kept trying until they got a girl! So she was named Rani—Queen—and she was treated like a precious gift by her parents. Tragically, her father was murdered when she was only twelve years old, irrevocably disrupting everything, forever. Her brothers became tougher than her dad had ever been. When she received an invitation from her aunt in Nairobi, Kenya, to help take care of the family while Masi (mom's sister) was convalescing from surgery, Mom jumped on the boat to escape. She had a lovely time in Nairobi and ended up married to Hoshang Shroff, my dad, within a few years, partly because her Masa (Masi's husband) thought it'd be a great way to keep her in Nairobi. Marrying at age seventeen was far too early, and my Granny was furious! She slapped Masa with a whopping strike! My mom and me had a feminist Granny, who inspired us. Moving to the lands of the Coast Salish Nations, where this narrative begins, provided us with even more opportunities to evolve as feminists. (Please see the accompanying video, which forms part of this narrative: <https://zxxresearch.med.ubc.ca/resources/>.)

My mother taught me so much about speaking out, standing my ground, and having fun while doing it. Our community, the Parsis, is well known for its eccentricities. She fit in very well! This story is about my mom and me, within the context of our family, community, and her health status—in relationship to her role in my work as an antiracism feminist activist and scholar. The F-words—“fu#k,” “feminism,” and “fun”—are emblematic of our frolicking mother-daughter bond. This feminist journey with my mother has taught me to love myself as a woman and that feminism is, in part, about loving women.

Born in Kenya, I was raised on the lands of the Coast Salish Nations on the West Coast of Turtle Island (North America). Mom was born in India. My mom taught me about sex and reproduction when I was four years old. By the time I was eight, I decided that I would change my middle name to mother’s first name. Up until then, my name was Farah Hoshang Shroff, following Parsi tradition of taking my dad’s first name as my middle name. My parents lovingly accepted my decision as I declared, “Since both of you made me, it makes sense to have both of your names in my name!”

My mother was a graduate student while I was a pre-teen. We were at a red light in the car, singing loudly to “I am strong. I am invincible. I am woman” (Helen Reddy), and she deftly unhooked her bra, then slipped it off, and waved it around (remaining otherwise fully clothed), before the light turned green! She had a knack for stunts like this. We laughed through them all.

We grew as feminists together, especially after I took my first women’s studies course and chatted her up with my newfound learnings. The course, taught by Dr. Alena Heitlinger, taught me to understand the widespread nature of patriarchy and how it manifested itself in horrible forms, such as violence against women, sexual harassment, wage discrepancies, and lack of access to abortion.

My mom and I discussed how difficult it was for many women to get abortions. We also talked about the abortion she had when she was twenty-nine due to her illness and the medications she was taking. Her doctors told her that she had to abort her fetus to protect her health. My mom told me that she thought about her baby boy every day and how sad she was to have to lose that pregnancy. Yet her mother, my Granny, wanted to have an abortion, but in colonial India, her Catholic physician denied her. These two generations of abortion stories are both gut wrenching.

Having a theoretical framework to think about feminist issues really helped us both understand our own lives and the lives of women in our family before us. We both felt fortunate to live in an era where we had a relatively high degree of freedom, and we celebrated this freedom in many ways, whether it was travelling together or assessing cute guys at a distance. My mom’s childhood had been marred by a great deal of sexual repression, especially in the Catholic school she attended in India. Her sense of freedom as an adult

came partly from her joy at being released from the restraints of her childhood.

My mother was comfortable with who she was. Once when I was a teenager, I asked my mom why she was folding her hands inside her upper thighs, even though in other people's eyes, it might have looked improper if her hands got too close to her private parts. With her Anglo-Indian accent, she exclaimed, "Who cares!?!!" Thanks to her, I learned from a young age not to care too much about gossiping, backbiting, and the patriarchal norms that are used to judge women. I never heard her worry about what other people thought about her.

She was also very expressive with her words and used colourful language. This started when I came home from first-year university, having discovered the fun of swearing like a student, peppering every few sentences with four letter words:

Farah: "Women don't need to shave our legs and armpits! That's fu*#ing patriarchal!"

Mom: "Fu\$%! ya!"

Both of us laughed uproariously! She thought this latest university gimmick was the best one yet, and she never let go of it! This not only helped her express herself in a slightly rebellious fashion but also served her during times of hardship. The F-word was liberating for both of us as we learned that we did not need to be ladylike in order to be full-fledged women.

When she was about twenty-five and I was about five, she was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness: systemic lupus erythematosus. She was hospitalized countless times. Her physicians were certain that her flame would soon be extinguished. She made it to her early seventies (we don't know the exact year of her birth—funny thing about record keeping in those days) and defied all predictions. Many times, she was dubbed a "medical miracle." Her survival is due to her indomitable spirit and boundless family support (see Shroff, "Canada 127/150: Rani Mahrookh Shroff"). Her incredible courage, love, and sense of fun have inspired me and others to take risks, laugh at ourselves, and live freely. She also inspired me to create an oral history insider participatory action, feminist research project about the lives of women in our community, the ZXX Study: zxxresearch.med.ubc.ca

Giggling

Whispering

Speaking wordlessly

Mom and me had

Lots of fun

She was nineteen when I was born

So we grew up together

Fully embracing feminism

Speaking out for change

Long live strong (Parsi) women!

It was also because of her that I was exposed to queer culture at an early age. While she was at a bus stop en route to the University of British Columbia where she was a master of social work student, she met a new friend; let's call him Behram. He happened to be a gay Parsi man. Our community is typically tightknit, so they became fast friends, and Behram became a fixture in our home. Behram's nickname for me was Boom Boom and we loved to talk about cute guys, clothing, shoes, makeup, hair, and other fashion fun. When I was twelve, we were having dinner and talking about anal sex. I asked Behram about the specifics of penile penetration of the anus, and we had a somewhat light-hearted discussion about anatomical parts and their amazing versatility. Behram was very patient with us. Having Behram around taught me to love our friends and community, celebrating all of life's creative expressions.

Throughout my university education, right until I was a doctoral student in an antiracist, feminist, and progressive sociology program, my mom was supportive of my activist politics, within and outside academia. At dinner table conversations, she and I would battle other family members, supporting human rights, Indigenous land stewardship, abortion justice, and more. When my Iranian partner, Roozbeh, joined the family, he too was on our side.

My mom constantly told me: "Roozbeh is such a good find. He's such a good dad, such a loving husband, and such a good cook!" My mom was spot on. Roozbeh and I have shared equitably in household duties, child-raising, and all other aspects of being a family. The strong women in his family are wonderful role models. It's so interesting when people find out that my life partner is of Iranian heritage as he breaks their stereotypical ideas.

Roozbeh and I take great pains to expose our sons, Zubin and Arman, to the power, beauty, and resilience of women and gender nonconforming people. My hope for their generation is that they grow up respecting women and seeing them as bright classmates, able athletes, and capable leaders, as this will

allow them to fully express their masculinities in vulnerable ways, breaking through the toxic straitjackets of manhood. In their future, I envision a world in which girls, women, and gender nonconforming folks are able to live their lives to their full potential. My mother's laughter, strength, and insight have inspired me to work towards such possibilities. Together, we embraced feminism, four letter words, and fun!

Endnotes

1. This written piece is accompanied by an audio-visual piece: "The F Word: Dr Shroff talks about her Mom and Grandmother." Please see the accompanying video, which forms part of this narrative: <https://zxxresearch.med.ubc.ca/resources/>

Works Cited

- Shroff, Farah Mahrukh Coomi. "Canada 127/150: Rani Mahrookh Shroff—Indomitable Spirit." *Canadian Race Relations Foundation*, www.crrf-fcrr.ca/en/programs/our-canada/150-stories/search-150-stories/item/26841-canada-127-150-rani-mahrookh-shroff-indomitable-spirit. Accessed 1 Sept. 2021.
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