

CELEBRATING
FEMALE
DIVERSITY IN
THE NHS

**STRONG
WOMEN IN
THE NHS**

I have been highly inspired by the poster “We can do it” aka Rosie the riveter who has served as a powerful symbol to many women and has motivated and provided strength to many individuals throughout society. I have created a series of work (which is on going) to celebrate the many strong women within our NHS workforce.

The NHS workforce is made up of a diverse community, however, like many organisation there are also some inequalities that are embedded within the NHS. In order to gain insight into the thoughts of other NHS workers, I have requested my colleagues to be my muses and tell the story of their background and the challenges they have faced as women and as being a part of the ethnic minority. In my series of art pieces I have used an urban style to- accentuate the powerful role the women play as NHS workers. I have written strong women in English as well as their native language.



We Can Do It!



Name: Joanne A

Background: I am a Filipino national who was born and raised in the Philippines. I have been working as a staff nurse in a prominent government hospital in the Philippines for five years before I moved to the United Kingdom. Nursing profession back home does not get the treatment it deserves. Filipino nurses are poorly compensated compared to other neighbouring nations in Asia. Having experienced the struggles of being a nurse in the Philippines marked by exhausting work hours, disproportionate nurse-patient ratio and little salary, I have decided to work overseas and fortunately, made it to England.

Religion: Roman Catholic

Professional career: Nurse

Challenges : I was raised in a single parent family. My father left us when we were still very young so it was just me, my sister and my mom. Being a mother and a father at the same time was the hardest role one could ever be. Living in a world of patriarchy, I have seen the sacrifices and struggles of a single mother. With the great help of my grandparents, my mom was able to provide all the basic needs in order for us to thrive. Juggling from different jobs and sidelines to generate income, she was empowered by her will to nurture her children to the best of her abilities. Growing up with her providence and protection, I have seen how she became the strongest and most empowering woman I know. She has gained strength through all her sufferings and sacrifices. She always remind me that one doesn't need a man to rear a family. This was greatly proven as I have felt and seen her fruits of love for us.

So today, I think am indebted to my mother because I have adapted all the values she has inculcated in me. She taught me how to be strong and independent. When I decided to moved to the UK to work, my sole goal was to provide for my family. I was alone and unsure of the path I was about to take. But my mom was always there to give me motivation. I have learned to do all things on my own as living overseas is very difficult. There would be nights where I could just cry because of homesickness, anxiety and exhaustion. But having a good cry somehow unburdens you and could give you a clean slate state of mind. This soft spot of mine did not got in my way to achieve my goals, instead, I use these to build my courage to face everyday challenges. Being a woman with such character I have now enabled me to function as a caring and empathic nurse.

Woman: Gone are the days when women are believed to stay at home and be caretakers. Being a woman nowadays has given us same entitlements as men but there are still circumstances wherein sexism still prevails. Luckily in the NHS I'm working with, I haven't experienced it myself. The challenge for myself is to perform my duties and responsibilities as a dedicated nurse in delivering quality health care services to all my patients at all times.

Ethnic minority: Experiencing culture shock was a challenging part I have faced upon migrating in the UK. The language, the people's attitude and behaviour, the food, the time difference, the changing seasons - these were the aspects in my life I have dealt with everyday until I was able to adjust and adapt. At workplace, I am glad to say that I have been warmly accepted and dealt by my colleagues when I first transferred. There are already a number of Filipinos ,in the Anaesthetics and Recovery Department, who have been working for a long time already and they have been established and known to be hardworking and dedicated to their roles. It has been a challenge to me to follow their footsteps of how they have managed to be excellent at performing their responsibilities as an NHS staff nurse.

Message: Always love yourself. Because in loving one's self, one learns to accept who and what they are, irrespective of any ethnic background and gender.

The vivid use of colours in the background is used to highlight the incredible journey that each woman has gone through. The women are painted in one tone to demonstrate the various emotions that they experience as workers of the NHS. The contrast of the dark against the colourful background is also intended to provide people with a sense of thought. It allows individuals to reflect on the many things that the models in the paintings have developed.

I also believe that the background is fun and playful and is also used as a form of pride that I feel for these women, who I regard as highly strong willed women. The painting have a biography of the challenges they faced being a women and ethnic minority and how they have overcome them.



We Can Do It!



Name: Sonia Lalla

Background: As a Kenyan Indian I've always struggled to explain the answer to the question 'Where are you from?' At times I've found it easier to say India because that's what my ethnicity is, at times I feel quintessentially Kenyan but the truth is I am both but also more. My parents moved to Kenya from India, for the dream of a brighter future for themselves and their only child, me. I was only a few months old when this transition happened so Kenya is the only home I know of. We still hold Indian culture and tradition dearly but also with an interesting blend of Kenyan heritage within our lifestyles.

Religion: Hindu

Education: Despite the incredible country Kenya is, my family and I soon realised that credibility only lies in education from the first world countries. I started university in Malaysia for 2.5 years and followed a transfer programme to University of Leicester, in England I completed my degree. Following which I have lived around various cities in England for the last 11 years.

Occupation and institution: Anaesthetic doctor working for NHS. The NHS is the only institution I've worked for, and passionately so. Perhaps understand the importance of a safe health care system more because of where I come from. Perhaps it's the combination of identities I carry with me that provides a holistic outlook to being a doctor within a multicultural system and country. Perhaps this evolving identity has allowed me to be accepted within the system despite the differences that are faced daily by people who belong to ethnic minorities, because I sound British.

Challenges: Some of the struggles I have encountered aren't purely because of my race either. It's not uncommon to spend time speaking to patients about their management for them to turn around and ask when the doctor will come to see them. The patient looking at and only talking to the white, male medical student with you because an Indian looking, female couldn't possibly be the senior doctor. Introducing yourself as the Anaesthetic doctor to a patient who then in turn answers a phone call to say 'I'm speaking to the nurse, I'll call you back'. The inbuilt sexism within the organisation is sadly reinforced by excusing these misconceptions, time and time again.

Message: I always get told 'You don't sound Kenyan' 'You don't look Kenyan' 'Why don't you go work in Kenya?' The real challenges are accepting that all these comments have some truth in them. But irrespective of where I come from, how I look or what my sex is I am a diligent and hard working doctor of anaesthesia who acts as an advocate for my patients to receive safe and quality care every day. I think it's time to accept that I can be a female Kenyan, Indian and British doctor in a highly intensive and specialised field of medicine bringing more to the table than is perceived by the wider public. And that is the beauty of being a female ethnic minority in a male dominated organisation of foreign country.

We Can Do It!





Name: Glynis

Background: I was born and grew up in London. My parents are from Nigeria. They moved to and settled in London after getting married, seeking a safer life for the family they wished to start (they grew up during the Civil War).

Religion: Christian

Education: Bart's and The London SMD Professional Career: Doctor (neurosurgical registrar).

Challenges: It's tricky to distinguish whether the challenges I sometimes face are due to gender, race, or a combination of both. I feel fortunate to have entered the profession at a time when societal norms seem to be progressing. I am also eternally grateful for my wonderful parents, whose overriding mantra to us growing up was that we were capable of achieving anything, and only to accept the best. Whilst I do not recall them ever explicitly declaring that gender or race could act as potential hurdles, I did get a sense that I might need to work harder than others to achieve similar goals.

As a minority: Whilst often perceived as shy during school, I now realise that I quickly learned from the experiences of the small number of my peers who were also of a minority race, to keep my head down. As one of three black girls in a class of more than thirty at primary school, I distinctly recall a particular teacher, who (thankfully) was only present on a Wednesday, who made me sit on the floor most lessons. Confused as to why my peers were allowed to speak freely, whereas I was not permitted to whisper a few quiet words to my friend regarding our assignment, and mortified by my Victorian novel-style predicament, the solution, I surmised, was to avoid school on Wednesdays. I would feign illness at the last minute. My parents, perplexed at the acute onset of 'tummy aches', would make the necessary inquiries. But relief – at avoiding grim recipe of the cold, hard, classroom floor, combined with sympathetic looks from my peers, served with the painful glares of my teacher – was my overriding emotion. Until I could discern my malfunction and fix it accordingly, the inquisitions were worth it.

Adult me realises 'tummy aches' meant my father couldn't go to work, risking detracting from my parent's – already little – income. Striving to be unnoticeable was perhaps a pattern persisted throughout school. Keeping my head down and studying hard, sitting numerous exams to get into good schools, I found myself one of approximately five black girls from Year 7 to Year 13. We were often confused for one-another by teachers, and (although unspoken) the camaraderie felt strong: we came to know each other through common mistaken identity, leading to a nod, eyebrow raise or knowing smile across the corridors between classes. I had decided I wanted to be a doctor. Another black girl in my year also planned to apply for medical school. We were both bright students with good grades who had proven ourselves by virtue of arriving at that point. Yet, the discouragement we met, like other things, was the same.

As a female: These days, the assumption that the often male, often white medical student or (more) junior doctor I am accompanied by is my senior colleague or boss is a common one, and one which on reflection I have now come to expect. Such events are typically followed by a polite correction from me, an uncomfortable 'oops, sorry!' from the ill-informed party, awkward smiles all round, and a hasty change of subject. Whether real or imagined, it sometimes feels as though compared to my counterparts, certain behaviours which may be deemed acceptable for them – sometimes even expected – are not deemed acceptable for me, or others like me. In that regard, it can feel like walking a tightrope. I hope this feeling will gradually ease, and that attitudes will change as people start challenging their own assumptions. Luckily, until then I really like my job and did a lot of balance beam at school.

Message to others: My message is one of self-belief and self-worth. Believing in myself and my worth are the main factors which have carried me to the other side of tough times. They are traits which I feel can help overcome most barriers, real or perceived. And sometimes it takes other people who are close to you to remind you of this, so a strong unit of people who love you really helps. If you have one, great. If you don't, try and build one. My mum always says that 'no man is an island', and it is only as an adult that I am truly beginning to understand what she means. And finally, 'to thine own self be true' (courtesy of W. Shakespeare), because it is unlikely that with this mindset you will go far wrong.

We Can Do It!





Name: Rana Najim

Background: I am a 34 year old female of Iraqi heritage. My father graduated from medical school in Basra, Iraq. His parents sent him to study his MRCP examinations in the UK as he was always one to speak up and never stay quiet, which led them to fear for his life living under the dictatorship regime of Saddam Hussein. My mother's family are originally from Mosul in Iraq, but moved to Beirut, Lebanon, as my grandfather felt it was a safer life for them. He had a successful career in Beirut but when the civil war broke out they came to London for safety, hoping to return to Lebanon once the war was over, but after 7 years of war, by the time the war ended, the U.K. had become their new home. My mother went on to study International Relations at University in London.

Religion: Muslim

Education: Bart's and the London University

Professional career: GP

Challenges: As an ethnic minority; Despite being born in the UK, when I was young I was always aware that I was from an ethnic minority, embarrassed by what made me different, and tried to hide it. At university I had my first experience of racism, medical students from out of London reacted to the diversity in London and made openly racist comments in front of me. Later putting on a head scarf during university I experienced a sudden lack of effort people made with me as I was no longer 'cool' living in a society where being cool can often be more important than being kind. At the same time this has always been overshadowed by those that go out of their way to show you it's okay your different.

As a woman: I certainly feel blessed in this country to have laws in place that give me rights as a working woman such as maternity leave and have received a lot of support throughout my training, although at times I have certainly experienced a sense of resentment from fellow colleagues, and there still is a further way to go to bridge the gender inequality gap. Women are heroes that have to carry the next generation and that initial period of feeding and bonding is vital for the child's development, a child that will hopefully contribute positivity to the future work force. The reality that we have no choice but to bear the children means men and women alike should accommodate the work place to make that compatible with work, it is a short but vital period of time where woman should not be made to feel guilty or less worthy at her work but her contribution celebrated and always made possible with ease. As a mother I question these 'princess' role models we still have for our daughters from a young age, then magazines plastered with the 'perfect look' as teenagers - the message you must be outwardly beautiful to be respected and worthy - teaching them to invest excess time into their looks (often at the detriment of their mental health), which in reality will benefit very little people, than one that has strived in inner beauty to benefit others and serve their community...that is the real hard work in this material world we live in today...and this is message I want to teach my daughters.

As a mother: I am blessed to now be a mother of 3 beautiful children. Initially as a full time trainee I experienced a lot of guilt that at times my child was paying the price and yet a sense of duty that as a doctor I have committed to a career of life long learning. Im grateful to now be able to work as a part time GP and give my children and my work my all. I'm fortunate my parents have always supported my career and my selfless mother is my hidden hero, of which all my success I owe to her.

Message: I hope when anyone looks at me with my scarf on and speaking Arabic to my children, they know I am also British. I love my background and embrace it as an adult, but I have also never set foot in Iraq before, and London is the only home I've ever known. My scarf is a symbol of my faith and my choice and certainly not suppression.

My fellow female ethnic BAME women if we respond to aversion with the best of character we can bring out the best in people, everything happens for a reason when one door closes for you a better one will open. Don't let obstacles on your way ever stop you, be true to yourself. Keep your intentions good, work hard and when there's a will there's a way!





Name: Parizad Avari

Background: My family heritage resides mainly in India though roots originating from Persia, where my Zoroastrian foremothers emigrated from. My mother is from India and my father, originally from Africa, immigrated to make a life in the UK before taking a career opportunity in the Middle East; this led to me being born in the United Arab Emirates.

Religion: Zoroastrian

Education: Bart's and the London Medical School

Professional Career: Doctor (Specialist Registrar in Diabetes and Endocrinology) and Clinical Researcher in Diabetes technology

Challenges: Being female and of ethnic-origin never really struck me as being different growing up abroad in an international school, with parents who believed in daughters having equal opportunities. Fast forward to this post coronavirus world, where the impacts of the disease are being particularly felt in the BAME community and under 5% of senior positions are held by ethnic minorities and women form an even smaller percentage – it is clear we still have room for progress. I am fortunate to be working within in a team that recognises the efforts of all individuals and gives opportunities and responsibilities based on performance rather than genetics.

Message: “Diversity in the modern world is beyond just skin colour – it’s gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, social background – and most important of all.... diversity of thought” - Idris Elba





Name: Nicola Rosenfelder

Background: I am Jewish and was born in the UK to parents who are first generation British. Both my parents were born in the UK but each of both of their parents came from countries where the Jewish population was all but annihilated by the Nazis. My maternal grandparents were both the sole survivors from 8 siblings each. Both families came to the UK to escape the effects of Nazi Germany and arrived in the 1930s.

Religion: Jewish

Education : St Bartholomew's and The Royal London School of Medicine

Profession: Doctor (Consultant in Oncology at The Royal Marsden)

Challenges: I've faced in my career have been to do with requirements of Jewish life and balancing them against work. For example there are many festivals in September/ October each year and, although the days of the festival vary from year to year, the same days of the week are effected on any given year. This makes it very difficult to take annual leave for all of them as clinical commitments tend to run on a weekly rotating basis so repeated absence on a given day for 3 out of 6 weeks is challenging. It means I've missed many of the festival days with my family. In addition I keep to a kosher diet and kosher food is not usually available at work events such as conferences etc. and not being able to eat with others is somewhat excluding. Challenges as a mother would be the feeling of guilt of missing out either at work or at home but when the balance is right it is an amazingly rewarding life.

Message: I would send to other women is to stand up for yourself and don't discriminate against other women (or men!). We need to all look after one another in this work and try and reduce each others stresses





Name: Naghmeh Teymourian-Yates

Heritage: Iranian

Religion: Baha'i

Why did you come to the UK?

I was born in Iran, where I was studying Law at University until the Iranian Revolution in 1978. My family and I are members of the Baha'i faith and we had to flee for our lives due to religious persecution. On arrival in the UK, the course of my life and my career changed and I ended up qualifying as a nurse and a midwife. Although nursing and midwifery was not the career I had originally chosen in my life, 41 years on, it has turned out to be my vocation, and I can't see myself having done anything else.

Career: Midwife

Challenges as an ethnic minority:

Unfortunately I have experienced many challenges in this country as an ethnic minority. It was first evident to me when I arrived 43 years ago and was applying for my nursing. I wrote to 40 hospitals to make applications and only 2 hospitals were willing to interview me. The others all wrote to me saying that due to being from Iran they could not offer me an interview. When I was studying nursing my class mates would laugh at my accent, society is now becoming a lot more aware of these micro aggressions.

Back in the 1980s the patients would ask me where I was from and I would say Iran and you could see them cringing. These challenges have made me stronger and more resilient. My husband is English and my strength has allowed me to bring up our children in two different cultures and with the mentality that they are no different to anyone else no matter what race or religion.

As an ethnic minority you have to prove yourself even more in your working life and for any promotions etc because you know there may be biases.

I always have had to be the best of the best to compete. I have always had to be one step ahead of everyone else.

Challenges as a woman:

Luckily I have not faced any challenges as a woman as I work in an all female environment on the maternity ward.

Challenges as a mother:

As a mother I was extremely lucky that I worked part time when I had my children and I started working on nights. This meant that I was at home in the day time to care for my children while my husband was at work. There are not many jobs where I would have been able to do this!

Message to others:

No matter what race, religion, gender, sexuality, we all deserve the same opportunities in life. Embrace and be proud of your differences, it is what makes us unique and beautiful as humans. The Earth is but one country and mankind it's citizens.