

LEENA HASAN

## **HOW DID I GET HERE? REFLECTIONS OF AN INTROVERTED ACTIVIST<sup>14</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

This essay is a reflection on my journey—as a settler Canadian daughter of Bangladeshi immigrant physicians—toward becoming a climate justice activist with particular focus on the area of climate change. I begin by discussing my identity development and the role models who helped shape my ethics, and then share my personal experience of overcoming my fears and anxieties in order to become an effective change agent. Finally, I outline the lessons learned from my involvement in activism and discuss my vision for moving forward.

### **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MY VALUES: IDENTITY FORMATION AND ROLE MODELS**

There are a variety of factors that lead one to become a social justice activist. Looking back on my own experience, I now acknowledge the significance that my identity formation and personal role models have had in shaping my core values and helping me develop a positive sense of self. These factors provided the foundation I needed to become an advocate for social justice. I was born and raised in Winnipeg, on Treaty 1 territory, as the daughter of Bangladeshi immigrants who were part of a select group of international medical graduates to become licensed as family physicians in Canada. Consequently, I grew up with more privilege than most in the diasporic community, living in a wealthy suburban neighbourhood and attending a private all-girls school. This benefited me in terms of education, but also made me naïve and entitled at times, as I was sheltered from many of the hardships faced by other South Asian girls. Like many South Asian parents, my parents came from relatively humble middle-class beginnings in a region of fluctuating political stability, and thus security was a top priority for them. Because of this, my parents instilled a strong sense of financial and social responsibility in me and my brother, teaching us to appreciate everything we had. We were taught to

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<sup>14</sup> This paper and the speech based on it were prepared on the unceded ancestral territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam Nations. It is important that we settlers reflect on how we benefit from the oppression of Indigenous people across Canada and the world simply by being here, and consider our role as uninvited guests with a responsibility to stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples. We must recognize that the liberation of Indigenous Peoples is tied to the rest of humanity's liberation. I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Habiba Zaman for providing me with this opportunity for self-reflection and the chance to share my story; Dr. Sanzida Habib for sharing helpful resources to guide my writing; and Avanti Haque and Jessie Russell for their editing and their emotional support.

look up to people like my mother's own role model, Shariff Hossain, a retired principal who dedicated his life to running an orphanage and providing vocational skills training for single mothers in Bangladesh, taking nothing for himself.

It may be said that my mother is a pioneer in her own right, immigrating to Canada and becoming a keystone in the community. A family doctor trained in Bangladesh, she went against the grain by leaving her homeland to pursue career opportunities in North America as an independent woman. She believed that she could have a greater social impact on the world by taking advantage of the opportunities in Canada to benefit marginalized people in Bangladesh and beyond. Never one to shy away from doing the right thing even when goes against the norm, my mother wears many hats in her community, serving as an advocate for refugees, organizing and fundraising to support the Rohingya people living in refugee camps in Bangladesh, and collecting water bottles for recycling at community events. She is a poet who reminds us of our humanity and purpose and a trusted confidante and friend who always puts service before fun. She is a mother to many, and I am proud to share her.

In addition to my mother, I was fortunate to be surrounded by other inspiring role models such as the Rahman sisters. Daughters of a local Bangladeshi-Canadian physician who was an Elder of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in Winnipeg, these women are the funniest and most creative, active, and passionate people I know. They and their friends helped shape my perspectives of what it meant to be a Canadian Muslim. They taught me how feminism and environmentalism intertwined with Islam, busted patriarchal cultural myths about Islam, and participated in whatever activities they wanted to while continuing to don the hijab. The eldest is an eye surgeon and community advocate who has used her skills to provide surgery free of charge to marginalized communities via Orbis, the world's first mobile eye hospital constructed onboard an airplane. The younger two are award-winning artist entrepreneurs who founded Snow Angel Films, a film production company that creates inspiring, thought-provoking, meaningful, and entertaining films that raise the voices of Muslims and other marginalized people and give audiences the opportunity to engage with social issues. Having these powerful women in my life allowed me to envision the kind of accomplishments that were possible for me as a Bangladeshi-Canadian, and I continue to be inspired by them today.

#### THE STRUGGLE: MY JOURNEY TO ACTIVISM

Thanks to the combination of my idealistic personality and my Islamic upbringing, I had a heavy conscience from a young age, and was always reflecting on the potential consequences my actions had on humanity and the world. In particular, climate change stood out to me as an issue of grave concern. I strongly felt the urgency of the impending threat to humanity and life on this planet. The issue became all the more personal when my second cousin showed me an article in which I learned that climate change threatened to cause rising sea levels that would put two-thirds of Bangladesh underwater. I was frustrated by the shortsightedness of leaders and people around me, and felt it was my duty to do my part to address it.

For me, becoming an activist was a gradual process. Although I had a fiery passion inside of me to fight against climate change, as someone who was socially anxious, I struggled to find the courage to speak out and try to convince climate deniers. I felt paralyzed by fear of criticism and failure. At the beginning of my journey toward activism, I did not have confidence in my ability to write a letter and was too afraid to post petitions on my Facebook page for all my friends to see.

Another challenge I faced was the all-too-common pressure from my South Asian parents to perform well academically and ensure myself a secure career. Climate change and environmentalism were my true passion, but I was afraid that a degree in Environmental Science would make it difficult for me to find a stable career. I bought into my parents' (let's be real—it was my father's) argument that I should pursue a path in medicine; after all, having the financial stability and influence of a doctor could give me the power to have a greater impact in the future. As a result, I mostly put my true passion on hold until I gained admission into the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Manitoba.

Feeling frustrated because I didn't feel like I was living up to my social responsibility, I finally moved from slacktivism to activism after I began medical school. I was no longer willing to wait until I had my life together to take action, so I finally began to face my fears. One major step in coming out of my shell involved volunteering at a table to raise funds for sick children. The experience of forcing myself to ask for donations helped me face my fear of rejection and gain confidence in advocating to strangers. I realized that most people were polite and I had the ability to not take rejection personally. I took my next step toward finally beginning to address the issue I was most passionate about—climate change. In the fall of 2009, the first International Day of Climate Action was organized in cities across the globe. The idea of people all over the world uniting to bring attention to a shared crisis deeply resonated with me. I finally mustered up the courage to email all my peers and friends to join the local event in Winnipeg. Unfortunately, it took me until the day before the event to muster up the courage to email everyone, so in the end none of them showed up. Despite this, the experience of joining with community members inspired me to join the growing global movement.

My first major step toward becoming an activist was volunteering for and eventually leading a non-profit organization called Books with Wings, which sent thousands of donated medical and other textbooks to university libraries in Afghanistan. I was drawn to the work because I appreciated the overlap of social justice with sustainability inherent in redistributing neglected resources in a socially impactful way. By taking advantage of shipments already going to Afghanistan, we were able to empower Afghan medical students and others with knowledge they could use to improve conditions in the country. This experience was important to my growth, as I gained leadership and organizational skills by learning how to recruit and mobilize volunteers to help collect, organize, and deliver the books. I also learned a painful lesson about the fatal consequences of not understanding the political context in a conflict-ridden nation. Because of our naïveté in labeling the boxes of books with the Canadian

flag, one of the drivers delivering the books was killed. It was a heartbreaking and eye-opening experience.

However, as I moved from the classroom to my clinical rotations, I began losing myself again. I struggled to fully engage in my work and hated myself for being ungrateful for the privilege I held. I wanted so badly to care more and not to lose perspective regarding the importance of the work I was doing. It took years for me to realize that it was not possible to force myself to care and that not feeling passionate about medicine didn't mean I was a bad person. In fact, my inability to continue medicine was a sign that took me months to recognize. After I failed internal medicine and received feedback that I was not engaged, the Dean of Student Affairs, who knew about my passion for social justice through my work with Books with Wings, suggested I pursue a Masters of Public Health. This was a hard pill for me to swallow. To me, it felt like I was being asked to give up, and I never saw myself as someone who would give up without a fight. I thought that if I put my head down and tried harder for a little while longer, all of my struggles would pay off. The only academic support I received initially was feedback on my clinical skills, so I started seeing the school psychologist and a psychiatrist to address why I couldn't focus or perform. Medications for anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder did nothing. Continuing to struggle, I took a leave of absence, feeling that I needed help before I could go back. After months of silence, I finally heard that the remediation director had quit. I then had to go through the ordeal of returning to the same hospital with staff who recognized me to repeat internal medicine before the school agreed to give me remedial support. I finally received support after failing internal medicine again, but none of the physicians were actually seeing how I worked, so I instead got help from a colleague of my mother's. With his help, I improved, but I was still terrified of going back. In addition, I still struggled with feeling like medicine was too far removed from my true area of interest. Then, as fate would have it, the opportunity of a lifetime came my way. The International Federation of Medical Students Association (IFMSA) was looking for an intern to work on the Climate Change and Health team at the headquarters of the World Health Organization. I poured all my passion into my application and was ecstatic when I found out that I had been accepted. Finally, I had found a way to make use of my medical knowledge and skills to fight for climate justice.

Through therapy, I have come to understand that emotions are information that helps guide us, so it's important for us to listen to them and try to understand where they are coming from instead of resisting them like I did for nine months. My heart was telling me that my life was too far out of alignment with my values. I needed to listen to my feeling brain even though I couldn't explain it adequately to my rational brain. Failure after failure forced me to look inside myself and face my truth. I was burdened by the disconnect between my consciousness about the urgency of climate change and my choice to keep living as though there were time to postpone taking action. I knew I had at least three more years in which I would have to maintain my focus at the individual biomedical level rather than the systems level. I could begin addressing problems at the systems level if I did a residency in Public Health, but my spirit couldn't tolerate waiting three more years to begin focusing on the issues I wanted to address. I

wanted to begin developing the skills I would need to do the work I was passionate about.

I began my internship with the intention of determining whether climate change and health was the area in which I wanted to work. This would help me decide if I should pursue a Masters of Public Health (MPH). While I found the process of writing reports rather dry, I found ways to be active by joining the WHO Intern Board in the new position of Sustainability Coordinator. It was rewarding to work on campaigns that encouraged action, including an environmental documentary-screening series that generated dialogue about environmental issues such as food waste and a Meatless Monday campaign in collaboration with the WHO cafeteria in which we educated WHO staff about the benefits to human health and the environment of reducing overall meat intake. I was also excited to have the privilege of co-organizing the second Climate and Health Summit taking place in Warsaw during the annual United Nations climate negotiations. It was inspiring to learn from leaders working at the intersections of climate change and health who were invited to speak at the summit. My supervisors were also gracious enough to give me the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to represent the WHO and the IFMSA at the UN climate negotiations.

My experience at the UN climate talks was incredibly eye-opening. I was inspired by YouNGO, a convergence of youth and NGOs that met each day of the negotiations to collaborate in planning their actions. I was also honoured and excited to join activists in the Cough for Coal rally who were protesting the World Coal Summit that was happening simultaneously. However, what I was most uplifted by was a youth who advocated for fossil fuel divestment, the fastest growing divestment movement in history. Following the successful example of the South African divestment campaign to end apartheid, students from across the globe began campaigning for their universities—as institutions responsible for producing knowledge to guide society—to remove the moral license of the top 200 corporations who were most responsible for fueling the climate crisis by refusing to invest in them. I was eager to support in any way I could.

After my experience working at the WHO, I finally took the time to do some soul-searching. I did some personal reflection and attended university workshops that helped me understand what I needed out of a career in order to be satisfied. I gained the clarity to see that the areas that interested me most were careers that provided social benefit, were intellectually stimulating, and involved creativity. I also did my own personal research regarding my introverted, intuitive, feeling, and perceiving (INFP) personality type to better understand my strengths and weaknesses.

I wanted to make use of my health knowledge, so I decided that an MPH would strike the perfect balance between health and climate. The Dean of Student Affairs recommended Simon Fraser University's Masters of Public Health program. I saw many advantages to this path. I was excited to see there was a professor there who did research in climate change and health. When I looked into the courses they offered in advocacy and communication, health promotion, and environmental health, it seemed like the program would provide me with the appropriate skills to work as an advocate in climate change and health. Finally, because I knew Vancouver to be a hub of progressive

organizing, especially in the area of climate change, I thought the environment and opportunities there would help nurture me as an activist. After I was successfully admitted to the program, I was not disappointed.

#### THRIVING AND LEARNING: ALIGNING MY LIFE WITH MY VALUES

I finally found my place when I joined the climate action club, SFU 350. Through SFU 350, I was able to meaningfully live my purpose by supporting the fossil fuel divestment movement. It was incredibly gratifying to find like-minded individuals whose intelligence, empathy, and creativity continue to inspire me. The group's decision-making process was inclusive and collaborative, unlike anything I had experienced before. The members were able to create a safe space where everyone was heard and respected regardless of experience. Together, we learned how to be strategic, balancing positive relationships with the Board of Governors with escalating actions when responses were inadequate. We were also able to share knowledge with other divestment groups across the country and support each other's campaigns. I was finally able to put my personal awareness-raising experience to use on Facebook as the group's Social Media Coordinator, sharing our important work and the work of groups with whom we stood in solidarity. Although the university has not yet agreed to fully divest, our work resulted in the formation of the Responsible Investment Committee and led to a commitment by SFU to reduce the carbon footprint of its investment portfolio by 30% by 2030. However, the most valuable thing many of us gained came in the form of lifelong friendships. Even though we have moved on to different areas of our lives, we continue to support and encourage each other in our activism, careers, and personal lives.

Today, I continue my climate activism through volunteering and supporting climate justice and democracy-related events. Mainly, I do outreach work as a volunteer for the non-profit My Sea to Sky to raise public awareness about the proposed Woodfibre LNG project, which threatens human safety and the ecosystems of communities in the Howe Sound area and much of Metro Vancouver in addition to committing us to potent fossil fuel emissions from fracked methane gas. In addition, I believe that Indigenous self-determination and a deeper understanding of Indigenous worldviews are vital to the spiritual revolution needed to achieve climate justice. This is what motivates my work as a Qualitative Analyst at the First Nations Health Authority, where I support research asking Elders and knowledge-keepers about Indigenous views of ecological health to improve the health and wellness of BC First Nations.

Since moving in 2014 to the portion of unceded Coast Salish territories known as Vancouver, my perspective on power as well as society and my place in it has expanded significantly. As someone who grew up in a mid-sized prairie city, I found many more opportunities in Vancouver compared to Winnipeg for development and growth toward becoming an activist, from community organizing workshops to direct action trainings. I am grateful for the privilege many of us have to hear directly from Indigenous activists fighting on the frontlines of resource extraction projects. I will continue to work in solidarity with these activists and develop my skills to contribute to the ultimate goal of Indigenous sovereignty and climate justice.

## SESSION IV

### **Poverty, Social Justice and Inclusion**

**Session Chair:** Neena Randhwal, Chimo Community Services, Richmond

**Ishmam Bhuiyan** “Poverty Activism in Vancouver: Replacing Charity and Equality with Justice and Equity”

**Sonali Johal** “The Need for a ‘Whole’ Education: Encouraging Our Students to Embrace Diversity in the Classroom”

**Rajdeep Dhadwal** “Understanding and Mitigating Climate Change: Confluences of Traditional Punjabi and Indigenous Perceptions of the Land”

**Avanti Haque** “Building Relationships between Racialized Communities: Achieving Social Justice in Canada”

