

A Letter to My Sister

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Dear Riya,

I am writing this letter to you so you know that I understand how hard life as a girl in India is. Someone once asked me when I had experienced the most humiliation in my life and this sent me down a whirlpool of never-ending thoughts. It took me a moment to figure out the answer to this question because I had experienced a lot of mortification in my life, as have you. Was it the time that Appatha told me I was too skinny to ever please a man? Or the time that Thatha looked at me with disgust every time I came home from school because “girls don’t deserve to gain an education.” As my brain was bombarded with these moments where I had been humiliated and made to feel guilty for doing nothing but existing, I recalled the moment that I had experienced the most humiliation. It was the day that our father told me that he was disgusted to have a daughter like me and that I will never succeed in life because I am a girl. He continued to talk about how he wished I was born as a boy, so he wouldn’t have to experience so much embarrassment. Following that day, I have made it my life’s mission to prove his words wrong because no woman ever deserves to be told that she can’t achieve what she wants to achieve solely because of her gender.

I grew up wondering why my mom was always treated with so much disrespect and why her opinions were never considered in any of the decisions made for the family prior to our parents’ divorce. Why was she forced to marry a man that was ten years older than her at the age of 19? Why hadn’t she completed college when she grew up dreaming of being a doctor one day? Why did she have me at such a young age when I grew up hearing she wished she never had to have kids? These thoughts would plague my brain as my young mind struggled to understand why she was always so angry. As I grew older, all the missing pieces began to fall into place. The way she was raised and the life she was forced into made her the way she is. All of the pent-up anger she would take out on me was caused by the abuse she faced throughout her marriage, which I finally understood as I grew older. In Indian culture, many women are not allowed to fall in love, and they are expected to marry the man that their parents pick for them. Our mom was forced into a marriage with an older man just because she fell in love. She was soon forced to bear children when she didn’t even know what sex was after a lifetime of being told she wasn’t enough because she was a female.

India is a highly religious and separated society through the caste system which is why women have the lowest status and are considered as inferiors to men. The prominence of the patriarchy, female infanticide, misogyny, dowry, and the caste system are all huge contributors to the way women are treated in India. Even as a child, I had been groped and have seen other women being groped so many times that it was considered normal behavior in India, which is a terrifying thought to think about. India has consistently lacked on the U.N. Development Program’s Gender Inequality Index as 131 out of 188 countries (Doshi). Crimes against women have only shown an upwards trend, with these crimes notably being rape, dowry deaths, and honor killings (Sharma). Cultural institutions and the caste system that has existed for centuries, specifically through patrilineality and patrilocality play a significant role in maintaining gender inequality and misogyny in India.

I think about what you are going through every moment of the day, and I'm still constantly fighting to get you and Ridvik back. I know how hard life has to be for you especially since you're a girl, which is why I wish to share mine and mom's experience with you through this letter. I lived what you're going through right now. Living in India after being raised in the U.S. is so hard because it is a completely different lifestyle. There are so many components that make this experience difficult, from the culture shock, to the difference in language and above all, the emphasis on gender inequality and misogyny in every aspect of life in India, from religion, social life, academia, family and politics. Through my experiences as an Indian girl who spent four years in India, I saw how marginalized Indian women truly are and how they are often taken advantage of by men. When our parents got their divorce, we moved in with our dad and that's when I realized how sexist his family truly is because I had been blind to it throughout my childhood. There were numerous times where I had seen how Ridvik was always put on a pedestal, and you and I were treated as inferior. Every time I tried to stand up to our grandparents for the way they were treating Ridvik better solely because he was a boy, my opinions would instantly be shut down with rage and disrespect.

India is known to be the most dangerous country for women, and I have realized that the reason that the degradation of women is still prevalent in India is due to the prominence of superstition, the patriarchal society, and the dominance of Hindu myths that people still believe. The preference for sons and the fear of having to potentially pay a dowry has led to about 12 million girls being aborted over the past three decades. Although India is known to be the largest democracy with the highest number of official languages, it is important to acknowledge that the country has been built on the blood, sweat, and tears of women and that it is known to be one of the most dangerous countries for a woman to live in (Pidd). There have been instances where women have been arrested and labeled as prostitutes for simply drinking at cities' bars (Pidd). These examples encompass the amount of misogyny that still exists in India.

Every breathing moment, my constant concern is whether you and Ridvik are safe. A part of me understands why our father was so overprotective of me and you, and that's because we are both girls, and living life as a girl in India is extremely difficult and dangerous. However, we cannot allow this to control every decision we make because life is far too short to live according to the rules that suppress women from reaching their full potential. Our family comes from a long line of men who strongly believe that women are incapable of reaching the same level of success as men. I grew up being told that my gender will be the reason that I fail, and everytime that I feel the slightest bit of demotivation, I allow our father's words to echo in my head so that I can prove him wrong. Our lives have been heavily influenced by guilt. We were both raised being told by our grandparents that we would be worth more if we were born as boys, which essentially leads us to feel guilty about being born. However, we must never let these words get to our heads because it is nothing but false and targeted anger. I try hard to empathize with the viewpoints of our grandparents and our father because I know they were raised in a completely different generation and lifestyle, but I will never understand how they can be so close-minded and inconsiderate of other viewpoints. It is essential to understand that not everything you may think is right is actually right. Listening to other perspectives and doing your own research about situations is important when coming to a conclusion because there is always room for more knowledge.

Your strength lies in recognizing your power in being a girl. Women have the power of bringing life into this world. You were brought into this world by a woman and given all the opportunities you have because our mother brought you here. Although life has been brutal to you, it is important to seek and recognize the beauty of life. Your life is in your hands, and no matter how much anyone around you tries to convince you otherwise, your decisions can only be ultimately made by you. To me being a woman means being strong-willed, articulate, and working

towards tearing down the double standards that are forced on us. It means supporting our fellow women when society is consistently plotting to turn us against each other. You should never feel guilty or apologize for being a female, for doing what you want, and for fighting for what you deserve. You are just as equal as any other gender, and never allow our family to convince you otherwise. I love you, Riya. I am always and forever here for you whenever you need me to be.

Love, Sulakshi

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