

UNAPOLOGETIC PARTICIPANTS — IN THEIR OWN WORDS

ANDLEEB SHAH 26, AND MAHAK SHAH 27, NELSON

My name is Andleeb Shah and I am a 26 year old Dentist from Nelson, East Lancashire and my name is Mahak Shah and I am a 27 year old Doctor working in the NHS.

The work Azraa is doing is so important on so many levels. The words/projects/vision resonate amongst so many of us living in Britain today.

As soon as we heard about *Unapologetic* we instantly wanted to get involved. We are honoured to be a part of Azraa's work. Identity has always been an interesting discussion with sisters, friends and colleagues and even our own parents. But we really understood this 'sense of belonging' when we both landed on our own two feet in the world.

We went to a predominantly Christian primary school where we struggled to fit in. Growing up we struggled with many internal battles relating to our identity in this world. We were ashamed of our culture. Especially when our parents would attend parent's evenings in their shalwar kameez. However, as we have grown older, we have learnt to love and appreciate that same culture. We embrace every aspect of our South Asian culture from the beautiful clothing, the foods, the traditions and of course the celebrations.

We are children of hard-working immigrant parents. We worked very hard to achieve what we have. We had no silver spoon, but only the unconditional love and support from our parents to help us achieve our dreams.

We want every South Asian woman to know that there is no limit to what you can achieve. That because you don't 'fit in' with the children surrounding you, doesn't mean that you are not 'normal'. You never need to 'fit in' only accept and love yourself for who you are.

We see ourselves as proud British Pakistani Muslim women and that's exactly what we want people to feel when they see Azraa's work. I hope people can see through Azraa's work that South Asian women are beautiful, bold, inspiring and will forever be unapologetic.

SHAHLEEN HUSSAIN, 19, BURNLEY

I wanted to be a part of *Unapologetic* because I believe many South Asian women are overlooked by our society because of religion, gender or ethnic background. My name is Shahleen Hussain, I am a Muslim, British Pakistani, I am 19 years old and study Religion, Culture and Society at Preston UCLan. I live in Burnley where a lot of South Asian women are often overlooked and ignored. Being a British Pakistani who is also Muslim and not essentially an 'ideal' Pakistani girl because I'm considered a plus size woman with a brain tumour are all reasons to show that South Asian girls are powerful and should never be seen as invisible. I live with a brain tumour and want to be a role model to someone to look up to for younger girls or older girls.

As someone from a South Asian background who lives with a brain tumour and is not afraid to be outspoken or brave enough to educate myself. I think many girls from South Asian backgrounds are looked down upon by their families or society because of certain stigmas in Asian cultures, but I want to show that your culture should never keep you from being what you want to be regardless of what your ethnic background is. However, I think you should always be happy to show your background and be proud of where you are from. This opportunity has allowed me to show other South Asian women that they are capable and powerful enough to be heard and shouldn't be invisible.

My experience after the photoshoot showed me that it is possible for other females from wider ethnicities to come together to show everyone that women should not be seen as invisible and regardless of any stereotypes put onto us we can come together to create something as amazing as Azraa's paintings to show that women from ethnic backgrounds or lower class areas are as powerful and educated as anyone else. I hope to inspire other girls seeing our pictures to never be afraid of what others will think and to be who they want to be regardless of what people might say.

AASIMA PATEL, 24, PRESTON

I'm 24 years old, and have studied Psychology (BSc) and Clinical Skills in Integrative Psychotherapy (MSc) at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Identity and culture play a huge role in my life as I'm from a South Asian background, yet I have never wanted to engage in traditional cultural expectations and that has come as a challenge especially as a female!

Additionally, I have a skin condition – Vitiligo. I absolutely love and embrace my skin and would never change it. In fact, my MSc dissertation was based on the positive lived experiences of vitiligo – I felt inspired to shed light on this topic mainly due to the damaging cultural stigmas surrounding it. Vitiligo is often seen as something very negative in the South Asian culture, and this is truly not the case for most people with the condition. And so I felt it important to dispel these false beliefs through my research, to not only reduce negativity about vitiligo – but to also help people with the condition feel more confident in knowing that so much positivity can come from having vitiligo and they should rise above any negativity society may subject them to.

Since conducting the research, I have been raising awareness of the findings via social media (IG: [@PositiveLiving_23](#)), articles and podcasts – it has been, and continues to be, a wonderful journey of new opportunities and meeting lovely people with vitiligo – all so positive and confident about their skin and eager to also raise awareness and dispel stigmas about the condition.

Hence why I decided to take part in this project, to raise awareness of vitiligo and the importance of embracing our differences, particularly within South Asian culture. I hope it will have a great positive impact to show people that diverse differences are beautiful and should be appreciated to help people feel confident in their own skin – enabling them to live positively, be independent and free to explore life's opportunities as they are... without feeling any societal pressure to change what makes them happy.

SAMIYA RAHMAN, 24, BURNLEY

My name is Samiya Rahman, I am 24 years old from Burnley. I have recently graduated in BA Graphic Design at UCLan and I have previously represented Lancashire in Cricket and still carry on excelling in various sports. A big part of my life is to do with sports and being a girl from the BAME community where there isn't much representation in sports teams I feel it is important to be a role model for others and myself. My grandparents are Bangladeshi and my mum is British Bangladeshi born and brought up in Burnley. A key part of my identity is my name as that is the first thing people will read and my name is what holds and will hold my stories and achievements. Culture to me comes from my family's roots and background, the beautiful language, the amazing food and the bond I share between my family, especially my grandparents.

I chose to get involved in this amazing project to push and challenge myself. I wanted to go out of my comfort zone and know that I am capable of whatever comes my way. As well as being a fellow creative and a photography enthusiast, the opportunity allowed me to gain first hand experience and gave me a great platform to share my story. I would like people to see the strong woman I have become regardless of life challenges that have come my way. I would like them to feel inspired and empowered because if I can challenge myself then they sure can.

SANA KHAN, 21, BURNLEY

I wanted to get involved with the project because I wanted to see South Asian women portrayed in a way that was diverse, confident and un-apologetic.

I am from a Pashtun/Pathan background and my parents were born in the Swat Valley. This is situated in the North Western region of Pakistan along the border to Afghanistan and so our culture takes elements from both countries and shares the same language, Pashto.

In the portrait I am wearing the blue Burka that is mainly associated with the women of Afghanistan however this style of dress has been adopted by many other Pashtun communities.

In light of recent events with the Taliban returning to govern Afghanistan, I thought that the fusion between east and west would highlight the reality of today's world. For many, the Burka is seen as controversial but for many more it can be a source of freedom.

HANNAH MULLAH, 25, PRESTON

My name's Hannah, I'm 25 years old, I'm British Indian and Muslim. I wanted to participate in the project as I was interested in sharing my story of identity, belonging and culture as someone who has found it difficult to associate with a particular one growing up. My background comes from a mental health aspect, as I grew up with a mother with mental health problems and we were ostracised and discriminated against due to this from the South Asian community. I then went on to study mental health nursing and it opened my eyes to what mental health truly is, rather than my own personal experience and the views of those that shunned mental ill-health. For a long time I identified with this mental health identity due to my experience and academic knowledge, however I struggled to identify who I was outside of this self-proclaimed persona I created. I found it difficult to completely associate myself with an Indian/South-Asian background due to being treated negatively, especially with my mother's illness and because we were considered 'westernised'. However, over the past few years through a self-searching journey, I have come to accept that outside of this mental health persona, I am westernised within the South-Asian community but still identify strongly with the Indian culture. Within the project I aimed to depict this westernisation and South-Asian culture together by presenting myself as my authentic self; with short bob hair, several facial and ear piercings, wearing clothing that may not be accepted within the community and by having an English pronounced name. Nonetheless, I also wanted to portray my South-Asian side by wearing cultural attire and jewellery along with choosing the particular top piece as bright and colourful which represents my personality. I hope that I am able to present myself within this project in this way and empower women in similar situations, where they may not have a sense of belonging. But they are able to see and feel that it is okay to have a multi-layered identity that derives from their specific heritage and culture and their life experiences, to achieve a strong sense of self to create our own identity.

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