

What we need from OB/GYNs

FARIHA S. KHAN

When my gynaecologist diagnosed me with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) at the age of 18—a syndrome that affects almost seven out of every ten women—her first worry was that I would be unable to bear children, instead of addressing the fact that I would probably be gaining weight excessively. She told me that the worst thing about the weight gain was that a boy would deem me undesirable for marriage and how devastating that would be for my parents; not that it would lead to cardiac problems for me.

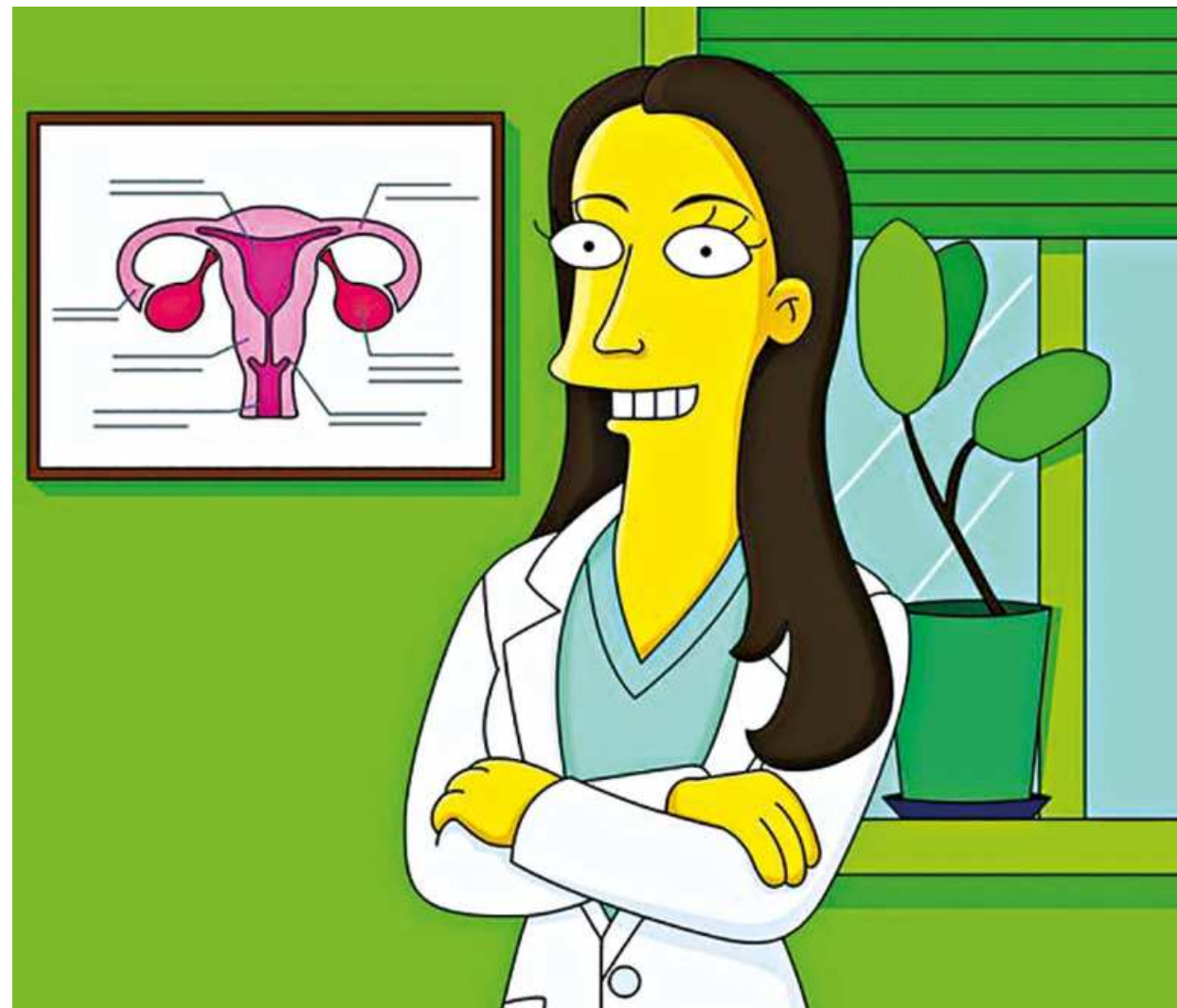
Sitting in front of her, I realised that I was one of many girls who had to sit and listen to doctors tell them that in the face of infertility, their lives were not valuable. When asked, girls as young as 15 responded to how they were subject to subtle sexist comments when they were diagnosed with diseases that would make them “undesirable” brides.

Anila Rahman*, 19, talks about how her doctor advised her to get married instead of assigning a healthy regimen that could help her deal with PCOS. She recalls, “When I was gaining a lot of weight because of the syndrome, the gynaecologist told my mother that if I were her daughter, she would be taking marriage into consideration. I was merely 16.”

Meanwhile, Tinath Zaeba, 17, recounts her experience with endometriosis, “My doctor told me that the extreme pain I had to live through was nothing to worry about because I had to think about the fact that the possibility of infertility would mean that I would have trouble getting married and that was a bigger problem for me.”

Other times, women have had to deal with doctors who refuse to perform procedures if they feel that it would hamper their ability to have children. Jannatul Ferdows, 17, remembers her experience, “I get very severe period cramps and irregularity and my mom and I were considering getting an endometrial ablation but the doctor refused to do it because I was an unmarried girl with no kids.”

While infertility is a significant downside of having to live with PCOS, we often find our gynaecologists deeming it the most significant aspect because women’s inability to bear children would make them unattractive. While tending to their patients, doctors often seem to forget that there are other downsides of falling sick, downsides which



can often be fatal to the life of the patient or have more serious consequences than infertility.

In a time of rising misogyny, we need our doctors to remind us that we are more than just child-bearing machines and that our lives matter just as much, even if we aren’t able to reproduce. We need them to tell us about the consequences of living with a disease and to assign us

with regimens that could potentially help us instead of putting us down for being “less of a woman.”

*Name has been changed.

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Ask for clear details about your diagnosis. Talk about possible regimens for your progress, regardless of their opinions.



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INVISIBLE WOMAN

How Women Are Being Excluded at the Workplace

RABITA SALEH

“Everyone should be given the opportunity to make bonds and express themselves in the workplace regardless of gender or any other demographic. Whether they are able to make use of the opportunity is up to them,” says Samira Yunus, EVP and Head of Actuarial Department, Fareast Islami Life Insurance Company Ltd.

Workplace relationships have never been known for their simplicity. The supportive yet competitive camaraderie between peers combined with the power dynamics between employers and employees have always resulted in intricately balanced relationships that can be complex and confusing to manoeuvre. With so many players to consider, any behaviour at the office may have unexpected consequences if not well thought through. Some practices at the workplace may seem harmless at first glance, but they can be exclusionary in ways people don’t immediately realise. In a society such as ours, women are particularly susceptible to such practices because of how our norms are constructed.

Activities such as smoking in office premises can seem like a personal choice. Yet they can be exclusionary to non-smokers when they become unofficial bonding sessions. Women here are statistically less likely to be smokers, making them more likely to be excluded of bonding sessions conducted around

these activities. Other examples of such practices may be going out together after office hours, or unofficial gatherings at a co-worker’s house.

“I belong to a conservative family and can’t stay out late at night. It definitely hinders me from building better inter-office relationships” expresses Tahmina Badhon, Administrative Executive at PIE International Education. Women in our society generally have tougher restrictions, and a greater variety of other commitments, on top of their crucial concerns regarding safety and public image, which result in them being hindered from participating in these activities.

Sometimes these concerns are exacerbated, not by males in the office, but through the actions of other female co-workers, as Nooha Sabanta Maula, Project Officer at Swisscontact, explains, “In the field, I once hung out in the guy’s room but other women suggested it’s not something they would do. Their comments made me feel more uncomfortable than the guys, who were welcoming. The women weren’t actually against being friendly with the boys, but society has conditioned them to think there are boundaries and conduct to be maintained. The workplace doesn’t have anything in place that helps men or women unlearn such things.”

Exclusion at the workplace may be either active or passive i.e. conducted without intent. There may be instances

where the employees at a firm deliberately exclude an individual of their dislike. There may also be instances of exclusion where the participants have no realisation that their actions may be excluding others. The latter is rarely talked about, and often highly misunderstood.

Peer-to-peer exclusion, which involves people working at the same tier in a firm has its hazards. However, it is more likely to be of the first kind, that of active exclusion, and it may be tackled through company policy, or the intervention of a supervisor. However, often supervisors themselves may be the perpetrators of the unintentional passive form of exclusion, and therefore it may go unnoticed for much longer, sometimes until the excluded group explicitly brings attention to it. Furthermore, when the exclusion involves a supervisor, its consequences may be farther reaching than peer-to-peer exclusion.

For instance, consider a situation when a supervisor and his or her supervisees hang out late after hours, or smoke together. They are providing those select employees with more of an opportunity to bond with them, while excluding those that may not want to or be able to participate in these activities. These select employees now have an unfair advantage that may translate to furthering their careers over those of the excluded group.

When asked whether she was ever worried about being passed by for a promotion, in favour of another colleague who had more unofficial bonding time with the supervisor, Yunus states that this has been a massive concern for her. “I have always felt this pressure. Since I’m a single mom, it has been even more difficult. Our society still has misogynistic views and they sadly often make awful comments about a person’s character when women try to make healthy bonds in the workplace.”

The problem of exclusion towards women may be more pronounced here, but it is by no means only limited to conservative societies. Survey results of over 240,000 men and women across the globe in *Work With Me: The 8 Blind Spots Between Men and Women In Business* by Barbara Annis and John Gray reveals that “eighty-one percent of women say they feel some form of exclusion at work, while ninety-two percent of men don’t believe that they’re excluding women.”

Just this January in the UK, the opinion of Chartered Management Institute head Ann Francke made headlines. She mentioned how conversations regarding football at the office might make women feel excluded. While her proposal for

banning “football banter” was met with valid criticism, the underlying problems of exclusion and unfair advantages remain. Banning topics of conversation at the office may not be the way to go when tackling exclusion, as it has the high probability of becoming an alienating policy dividing the workplace even further, while also perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes. However, a more nuanced approach where the people in charge are made aware of what may be an exclusionary situation and how to discourage or dissolve it, may be the key.

Looking back to the survey by Annis and Gray, it is clear that there exists some discrepancy in the opinions regarding exclusion between different demographics in a workplace. Those participating in exclusionary activities are barely aware of what they may even look like. Supervisors and bosses clearly have a large role to play in these situations, especially by being aware of biases they may form through interoffice relationships, or the selective bonding opportunities they may be providing their employees. However, awareness among the workforce regarding such issues is only the first step to addressing them. Entire societal constructs need to be redefined before workplaces can alleviate these problems.

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