Moving Beyond Stereotypes

FARAH GHUZNAVI

I had hit thirty before I finally forced myself to come face to face with an unpalatable truth... I LIKED cooking! In a culture which values the preparation of food as a basic requirement for any self-respecting woman, as well as a source of considerable pride among many women, this may seem like an unnecessarily dramatic statement. But the fact is that I had spent four years of my highly regimented convent school upbringing religiously failing my domestic science exams - term after term after term.

At the time, it wasn't clear to me why this was happening. My mother not much of a domestic goddess herself, though perfectly competent nevertheless pitched in to "help" me with my various homework assignments for knitting, embroidery, etc. The only thing that I showed any aptitude for (and gained any enjoyment out of) was using coloured thread to sew on jute cloth, because for this we were encouraged to let our imaginations run wild. All the other assignments fell into strictly controlled patterns and measurements, and it was those very strictures that I was rebelling against.

Or maybe it was bigger than that. Perhaps what I found really hard to accept was the idea that there was some kind of "join the dots" version of femininity that my classmates and I were supposed to aspire to (and conform to!) Another friend of mine, who later went on to become a successful human rights lawyer, felt that her ineptitude with the assignments given to us in domestic science was primarily related to boredom. I wish I could say the same.

I think that while none of the activities that were undertaken in domestic science classes actually excited me in the least with the possible exception of cooking (and even there I managed to turn my custard a strange shade of pale green, though it remained perfectly edible...) for me it was more of a question of being forced into activities for which I not only lacked an affinity, but which were also considered essential to facilitate my development into "the right kind of girl".

In the case of my lawyer friend, ironically enough it was her father's skill with the needle and other practical accomplishments that enabled her to obtain a pass mark. In my case, my mother did her best, but she couldn't compensate for the very individual non-cooperation movement I was waging, in the form of a low level, (barely) civil conflict with my domestic science teacher. That redoubtable lady clearly recognised the sullen non-conformity that drove me to pointlessly distinguish myself by my determined failure at activities that most of my peers considered relatively easy!

My teacher knew rebellion when she saw it, and like any self-respecting convent school teacher, she was not about to let it pass unpunished. As a result, on one occasion, when (after leaving my own needle at home) I had been foolish enough to offer my left hand to her for the needle she was to lend me during that lesson, I instead ended up with the needle embedded in the flesh of my palm. As we looked at each other with an ancient recognition and mutual hatred, I ignored the gasp from my classmates who had witnessed the incident and walked calmly out of the classroom holding my hand out ostentatiously for all to see the aforementioned needle protruding from my flesh, going without any further instruction to the corridor outside the classroom where I remained until the class period ended...

A couple of decades after that incident, you could be fooled into thinking that nothing much has changed in Bangladesh. The recent "greatest cook" contest announced on television makes no bones about the fact the participants in the contest are expected to be women. Furthermore, the rather puerile advertising campaign promoting the contest shows women's children - and husbands - fighting with each other to insist that it is their wife or mother who will be declared the "greatest cook" in the forthcoming competition. Despite my recent discovery that cooking can be both fun and relaxing, I find these stereotypes utterly depressing.

As in many other countries, our society is not kind to non-conformists. It begins early, with girls being taught that they should look and behave in a certain way, and display their talents within a pre-set range of skills. For those who do not fit easily into those stereotypes, the punishment for being different can be harsh. For a girl who is considered "sporty", there is at best limited approval to be had. One of my best friends at school was an amazingly talented athlete, particularly well suited to running. But by the time we were in Class Nine, she had given up sports altogether, because her parents made it very clear that not only did studies come first, but there was something faintly unattractive about a girl who was too athletic...! I saw another fellow student

> Whether it is by appealing to patriotic sentiments related to our land or its flag, playing good music by talented local artistes, or using humour and a clever tagline or two, there are any number of products being sold on television today, showing how far the industry has come.