Alumni Spotlight

This month’s Spotlight features Mariya, a former Religious Studies major who is now a social justice advocate using storytelling as a method for spreading awareness and change.

Mariya Taher:
Writer and Social Justice Advocate

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

My career is built of multiple roles. First, I’m a writer. A lot of my non-fiction writing relates to social justice issues and I have produced content for a variety of outlets such as NPR’s Code Switch, Huffington Post, Brown Girl Magazine, and many more.

I also am a cofounder of an organization called Sahiyo that aims to elevate the conversation on female genital cutting (FGC). The idea was to create a platform where various voices could come together to talk about this issue. It’s generally erroneously believed that FGC only happens in Africa, and Sahiyo works on raising the awareness that it also happens in India, other parts of Asia, and the United States. Our platform focuses on storytelling primarily from survivors and community members from Asian backgrounds in a number of ways, from writing, to video, to in-person, to research. In 2016, a doctor in Michigan was arrested for performing FGC on two minor girls. That put our organization in the spotlight since we were the only ones working with these under-recognized populations in South Asia. I’m currently working with the Massachusetts Women’s Bar Association to pass legislation to criminalize FGC and create education and outreach on the topic within the state.

I also am the Narrative Liaison with Topos Partnership, a public opinion communications research firm that examines the relationship with government in people’s lives and ways to create social change.

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through policy at a more impactful level. The topics they focus on range: public funding for the arts, how people view prostitution, how marginalized communities view the impact of government on their lives, etc. They brought me on board because of my unique background. As Narrative Liaison, I find creative ways of presenting their findings that would start conversations with a variety of audiences. I also build partnerships with the various organizations and companies we work with throughout the country.

This morning, I’m planning and applying for funding for an activist retreat for Sahiyo. Other days, I might be presenting at a conference, meeting with legislators about policy, or writing an article. I’ve been able to combine my multiple passions together to engage deeply in what I care about.

How did you get to where you are?

I grew up wanting to be a paleontologist. I have a family full of health professionals—pharmacists, doctors, physical therapists. Being a paleontologist was a very different idea, but was still in the sciences so I felt it was still practical. I entered UCSB as a Geology (now Earth Science) major. While doing GE courses, though, I came across Religious Studies. Those classes fascinated me. I was raised with religion but had always questioned it. Religion has so much power over people’s lives. It might determine who they marry, their beliefs, whether they think there’s an afterlife. Especially as our world is in the grips of Islamophobia and fearing immigrant populations, Religious Studies can provide a deeper understanding of people. I recognized that religious beliefs often become social norms in communities so bringing about social change comes with a real challenge when confronting that reality.

During my junior year, I was sitting in an upper division geology course and was so bored. I realized I wasn’t as interested in learning about the earth as I was in learning about people and humanity.

So, I changed to Religious Studies and picked up minors in Sociocultural Linguistics and Global Peace and Security. All of those degrees worked together to examine how people operate—the good and the bad, the conflict as well as the things that make people strive for better. As an immigrant’s kid, I learned a lot about my own experiences through my classes, from the duality of cultures to the different language learning patterns of different generations.

After undergrad, I interned with Red Cross Santa Barbara. It was a really disorganized experience and motivated me to learn more about developing and running effective nonprofits and programs. San Francisco State had a graduate program in social work with a concentration in administration and planning, and with the Bay Area being a social justice-oriented place, that felt like a good way to dive in. My thesis was an exploratory study on the continuation of female genital cutting in the United States. At the time, there was no research and

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very little awareness about this issue in the U.S. I knew friends and family who had undergone it, so I wanted to understand why it continued even though it’s illegal. I also wanted to contribute to an understanding of how to address it with sensitivity.

As part of my Master’s program, I did field work. The second year, my placement was at the Department on the Status of Women. Their mission was to improve the lives of women and girls within the city/county of San Francisco, but they also did some international work with gender equality in the corporate sector. They loved my contributions, and so, after graduation, they created a fellowship position for me to continue the projects I had been working on and to help organize events. After a few other part-time positions that kept developing my skills and interests, my volunteer position with W.O.M.A.N., Inc., a domestic violence organization in San Francisco, developed into a full-time job.

Six months in, the organization had a financial catastrophe. We almost went bankrupt. A lot of non-profits get into that situation and aren’t able to turn things around. But the people who remained at W.O.M.A.N., Inc., banded together and pulled the organization through that crisis. It became a lot stronger and it’s now a highly-respected non-profit. That experience was amazing and taught me a lot about what I wanted in a work environment.

After a policy fellowship through the Women’s Foundation of California, I moved to Boston for an MFA program in creative writing, an area of my interests I’d been wanting to explore further. To keep my connection with my social justice work, I contacted a domestic violence and sexual assault nonprofit and asked if I could create an internship where I bridged creative writing with their goals. They loved the idea.

During this time, I wrote a few pieces based on the interviews from my thesis. People began to reach out to me as more attention was being brought to female genital cutting in India and other parts of Asia. We banded together and started Sahiyo. I gave presentations and connected with activist groups. I found a position with Topos, who was willing to be flexible with my schedule while I built a nonprofit.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

I really feel getting my job as a peer advisor at the College of Letters and Science changed my trajectory for what I was doing at UCSB. That was my first job other than babysitting or tutoring and led to so many other things. I worked for Orientation staff and CLAS after that. We served the student population, helping them through all kinds of challenges. It made me want to get more active in student life and the campus in a way I wasn’t before and made me consider my skills in helping people. It was one of the advisors in L&S that validated my decision to change my major.
What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

To get more active sooner. I feel a lot happened my junior year and it would have been nice to do some of that exploration sooner. That said, I was really shy. That’s another thing my peer advisor position did for me: break me out of that shyness since I had to interact with people constantly. It helped build my confidence, which allowed me to seek opportunities and speak up in class. I’d say trying to work on that earlier would have made it easier for me to get engaged in new ways.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

I loved everything about UCSB—the friendships I made, the classes, the positions I held. I can’t imagine what my life would be if I hadn’t gone there. It was amazing to be in that beautiful location for four years while being challenged academically. It was the best of both worlds. You can’t ask for anything better than that.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

People sometimes have the best of intentions when they say things like, “This isn’t practical,” or “You need to figure out what you’re going to do after you graduate.” If you don’t have a straight path like going to medical school, it can make you feel lost. I definitely felt lost at times, that’s human nature. But my career is made of research I designed, skills I developed, and positions that were created to fit my skill sets, which all happened after undergrad. So how could I have known as an undergrad that is what I would be doing with my degree? I didn’t have a clear career goal. I was proactive about seeking opportunities, I didn’t let rejection stop me, and one day, I found that everything I’d dabbled in had come together.

See where your interests take you and don’t be afraid to think beyond the standard jobs you’ve been exposed to. Some of us don’t follow a path. Some of us build a path.

Mariya welcomes Gauchos to contact her via email with questions about her career or for mentorship. Requests to review resumes will not receive replies.

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