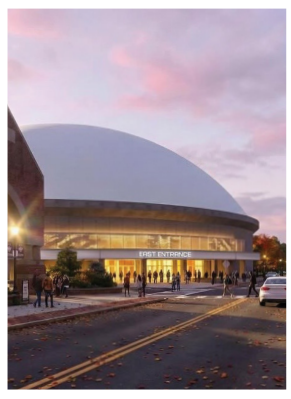
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UConn SAWEA gathers for Women's History Month event

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In honor of March's Women's History Month, the South Asian Women's Empowerment Association hosted their second annual women's panel on Monday, March 24.

The panel consisted of a Q&A portion, audience interaction and communal dialogue. The purpose of this workshop was to foster meaningful and effective conversation through representation and community, said the social justice and empowerment event coordinator Krisha Grigaliunas.

The first panelist was Anushka Shah, a junior allied health sciences major and communications minor at the University of Connecticut. For Shah, empowerment meant finding spaces that made her feel comfortable. She said joining her sorority, Kappa Phi Gamma Sorority, Inc., and becoming a pivotal leader within her sorority early on opened a lot of doors for accepting her identity and letting go of "cultural guilt." Within an academic setting, Shah said that actively searching for and prioritizing opportunities has been an effective way she has advocated for herself.

"Advocating for myself came from also speaking up, and making sure my voice was heard, and that my contributions mattered, and it didn't matter about, like, external validation," she stated. "I think that also comes from kind of letting go of embarrassment or cringe. I think that was what was stopping me from doing certain things."

When facing stereotypes, Shah has found herself dealing with the "Big Three: doctor, engineer, or lawyer." But for her, continuing her studies on the path to becoming a dentist has come completely by her own choice.

"I was never the stereotype of the super smart brown kid that was at the top of her class and had all the answers to the homework," she said. "So for me, this was also about just genuinely working hard and finding opportunities myself...and dismantling that kind of pressure."

The second panelist was international Ph.D. student Alina Ahmed in the philosophy department. Her work focuses on decolonial feminism from a global nationalist perspective. Ahmed was born in Pakistan, where she worked in the development sector and organized political activism. Her views of empowerment come from a different perspective to the neoliberal western conception.

"Empowerment from our culture, with our industries, keeping our epistemes and knowledge systems in mind and not looking to the west for empowerment, because there isn't just one type of empowerment that exists out there," Ahmed said.

Ahmed shared her personal struggles with advocating for herself during her time in the United States.

"Every room I walk into, I have to prove myself that I'm smart enough, or that I'm capable enough... and it just sucks because that's the state of the world right now" she shared.



Anushka Shah, Alina Ahmed, Bhoomi Thakore, and Niharika Yellamraju sit down for a panel in honor of Women's History Month. The panel was hosted by the South Asian Women's Empowerment Association (SAWEA). PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

When combating these microaggressions, Ahmed said she tries to actively be more straightforward with others when they make assumptions about her place.

"And sometimes, very frankly, just calling it out. Saying, I don't think that was appropriate. I don't think that was a good thing to say," she added.

When asked about common stereotypes South Asian women face, Ahmed commented that the common consensus was that she had to be very quiet, submissive and meek. Ahmed, however, said she is quite the opposite.

"Anyone who knows me knows I have too many opinions and I'm very loud. I don't care about a lot of the ways people perceive me," she said with a smile.

She said her identity as a Shia Muslim has taught her to prioritize justice and seeking equality. Her upbringing drives her to do the research she does within activism and striving for the pursuit of justice.

The third panelist was associate professor in the department of sociology, Bhoomi Thakore, who researches South Asian representation in media. One of the biggest misconceptions Thakore has actively dismantled is the ideology that all South Asians are in STEM. She said not just South Asians, but many academics of color undergo the misconception that they pursue what is often referred to as "me-search." Me-search is rooted in the idea that academics of color only pursue research that particularly pertains to their history or identity.

"I think it's highly problematic because it certainly contributes to minimizing the problems that people of color face in society. But it fails to acknowledge the relevance of those kinds of positions of inquiry to everyone," she said.

Thakore also brought up the matter of marginalized groups who need to fight for equal opportunity within the academic field. She explained how these groups are at a disadvantage because they essentially work harder to access the same doors more privileged groups have access to. Her advice is to look into the opportunities that feel the most authentic to the individual and forget about stereotypes and expectations when considering your own path.

Thakore's parents immigrated to the United States in the 1960s and faced all sorts of disparities being part of a small minority group at the time. She describes how her parents tried to assimilate her into American professional spaces.

"Not having an accent, not having that overt mark of 'otherness' or brown ethnicity. But also to be articulate... I think that was something instilled in me from a very early age," she explained.

The fourth panelist was an MFA graduate from Boston University, Niharika Yellamraju. Yellamraju grew up in a more diverse world around the Middle East and lived on her own beginning at age 15. She said she takes great pride in her research as a graduate student in design and art history.



Yellamraju's family consisted of mainly artists and teachers, which pushed her to continue her education through many postgraduate programs. She described how she faced the misconceptions of me-search firsthand.

"It's not only design. We talk about philosophy, sociology, representation, STEM even..." she said. "By showing them the scope that we have, by introducing technology, by introducing interdisciplinary themes into theses, was something that kind of worked to break that kind of stereotype people had of us South Asians."

Yellamraju describes her upbringing as strengthened by the women around her. She was able to grow up to appreciate art and her culture through these role models.

"One major thing that helped me be South Asian is not being afraid of running out of ideas," she stated.

Her experiences in many different areas and cultures within the South Asian community fostered her own inspiration for her research.

At the end of the panel, Ahmed stated what gives her hope in uncertain times where women are often forgotten in society: "Community and solidarity, seeing brilliant women like Dr. Bhoomi just existing."

"The emerging generation of women, especially South Asian women, who are empowered to build this community and lean into this community to hold events like this. I mean, I didn't have events like this growing up. So, I really had a disadvantage, so I think creating a space to have these conversations is a big first step." Thakore concluded.

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