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When I stand in front of a class full of students or just step into a grocery store, people see an international student of color from Bangladesh flaunting her hijab who also happens to be a first-generation college graduate and the very first PhD student of her family, studying and teaching a highly male-dominated discipline called Economics.

I proudly represent my different backgrounds and try my best to diffuse the feeling of inclusion and belonging in others. Particularly, when I stand in front of a class as their instructor of TA, that first-generation Hispanic or Asian girl with immigrant parents looks at me with sparkles of assurance of her dream. That shy boy with speech anxiety who never participate in class and comes to me every day to share his idea after the class is over, somehow by the end of the semester, starts to raise his hand slightly and share his opinion with a shaky voice during the class discussions. That self-cautious hijabi girl hiding in the last seat of the class starts to be more comfortable and I start seeing her sitting at the front and occasionally asking questions. Those boys playing the University's Athlete team who already emailed me earlier that they are going to miss the class still show up late, all-sweaty after their practice, and ask intelligent intuitive questions. All these scenarios are real happenstance from my different courses and I take immense pride and find fulfillment in these little events.

I also go out of my way to unveil the cultural barriers with my students and people who represent the majority. Sometimes, it is just that they are not very familiar with our cultures and beliefs. And it is human nature to have fear of the unknown. Hence, I believe, we also have part of the responsibility in reducing the gap. I am usually the person reaching out saying 'hi' or smiling first, and every single time I have been responded to with much kindness and friendliness.

I started my PhD in Economics at the University of Houston (UH) coming straight from Bangladesh having no experience of living abroad before. With my very unique background which is at the intersection of so many minority identities, I had deep fears of being left out or isolated. But delightfully, I found this city to be a melting pot of so many cultures where each culture is respected and celebrated. Being in the shoes of minority groups, I know exactly how it feels to be the only person who starkly looks and acts differently. At the same time, living in this wonderful community, I also know how it feels when people accept me with all my differences and offer me a sense of belonging by including me. This definitely helped me to cope with the hardships of living alone by myself thousands of miles away from my family. With the passage of time, now, when I reversed roles and am given the authority of standing on the other side, I make sure I address this issue which I learned from my own experience. I try my best to make everyone feel safe, included, and cared for.

In today's globalized world, representation and inclusion are crucial. In the big picture, we all are one big family, irrespective of our race, skin, faith, sexuality, or particular choices of living life. And if we all just keep doing our part of extending the hand of friendship and respect towards each other, it is only a matter of time that all the misunderstandings between us will be a matter of history.