



A BIT OF ME

PTODI Celebrates SUNY Broome's Women

Bina Paramasivaiah, MSEE

Who is the most influential woman you know? How does she inspire you?

Two women who have inspired me greatly in my life are my mother and my maternal grandmother.

I would say that my mother has had a greater influence on me because I not only had a closer relationship with her, but she was also part of my life for a couple of decades longer than my grandmother was. I greatly admired my mother's courage, boldness, skills, wisdom, honesty and a sense of justice and fair play. She was a role model and admired greatly by her four daughters, granddaughter, countless nieces, nephews and even great nieces! All in our extended family respected her very much and sought her advice in personal and family matters. She continued to influence and counsel the younger generations until her death five years ago.

My grandmother was a unique woman and such an inspiration to everyone! She became a widow when she was twenty-six and was left with three children to take care of, the youngest being my mother who was two years old (my grandmother lost several other children in childbirth or infancy). In the conservative Brahmin society of her community in the 1930's India where women had no voice or independence, my grandmother was expected to give up all her rights, lead a very austere life confined to the house doing nothing but housework (treated almost as a pariah in society) and depend on the charity of her relatives to care for her and her children. She defied them all, moved to a nearby large city and found a job working in a restaurant. She later started several of her own businesses in succession to provide for her family, accumulated some wealth and property, and led a truly independent life as the matriarch of the family. Her charm, warmth, generosity, determination, and chutzpah were legendary, and she touched and inspired everyone she ever encountered – men, women, young and old. I have had many strong female-influences in my life as I come from large female-dominated families on both parents' sides of the family.



Bina Paramasivaiah

**Associate Professor
Engineering Technologies Department**

*What have been the most significant changes in women's roles in the past 50 years?
In the past 10 years?*

In the past 50 years, I would say women entering the workforce in greater numbers and becoming more financially independent, whether married or single. This has led to women having a greater voice and control over their lives.

In the past 10 years, we have seen more women taking up non-traditional roles and careers in the workforce, in politics & government, business and other professional services. To have the first woman vice-president, after coming so close to having the first woman president are milestones we have reached in the last decade. There are still long ways to go for women to break barriers in many areas; especially in the field of engineering that I am in where less than 20% of engineers are women. The lack of advancement of women in engineering and technology, and not being able to move the percentage needle much in the past couple of decades is very disappointing.



*Why are "firsts" important to note?
What other barrier breakers have
you witnessed in your lifetime?*

"Firsts" are important to note to elevate new voices, pave the way for others to follow, and make people aware of the diversity of life experiences and the challenges many must overcome.

Celebrating "firsts" can also highlight people and issues that may not be as well known by everyone, and contribute to a better understanding of the complexity and richness of the world we live in.

Women have broken many glass ceilings in my lifetime – too many to list, but some women that come to mind are astronaut Sally Ride, Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Indra Nooyi, the first female CEO of PepsiCo. As a fellow Indian American immigrant to this country, I share a special sense of pride in Mrs. Nooyi's achievement.

Who is your favorite fictional woman and why?

Jane Austen is one of my favorite authors, and I love Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Another female character from the 19th century that comes to mind is Jo March in *Little Women*. Maybe the fact that they showed such strength and grace in overcoming many hardships in a time when women were certainly treated as the weaker and lesser gender left a greater impression on me. Whether it is novels, movies, or television, I am always attracted to strong, intelligent, independent, and free-spirited women roles!

Which achievement made by feminists are you most thankful for? Why?

The right to vote would have to top the list.

Without this right, women and society in general would not have progressed to the extent we have, although we still have some ways to go for women to participate fully in all facets of life and society. Another right I am appreciative of is women having the right to control their own bodies and being able to plan their family, their future, and the life they want to lead.

What are some of the biggest challenges that women face today? How do you think these might change over the next 20 years?

I think women still carry a greater burden in their families, especially if they also work outside the home, as in many cases they are the 'sandwich generation' and continue to be the main caregivers for their children and parents.

Trying to do it all requires a lot of strength and gives women less time to take care of themselves and their needs. I hope some of these daily challenges become more equitable between men and women in the future. I also fear us going backwards on the issue of voting rights with more restrictions being placed by new laws in many states, and women not having the right to choose due to future rulings by the Supreme Court.

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