

Safia's Choice

THE 2001 WORKING MOTHER OF THE YEAR, OU GRADUATE SAFIA KHALIL RIZVI, ISN'T AFRAID OF CHANGE — OR OF CHANGING OTHER WOMEN'S LIVES.

BY TAMAR SCHREIBMAN

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Safia Rizvi and her American-born daughter Maham are a thoroughly modern mother and daughter, but they take pride in their Pakistani heritage, surrounding themselves with the best of both worlds.

Eleven-year-old Sheherzad Maham Rizvi reels off a list of things she wants to be when she grows up: the first woman president of the United States, a doctor, a movie star, a singer. Whatever career she chooses, she also plans to “on the side, start a foundation that helps homeless kids and feeds them.”

To anyone who knows Maham’s mother, Safia Khalil Rizvi, it would come as no surprise that Maham believes she can be anything she wants to be. At 36, Safia is an accomplished scientist—she analyzes human genome data for the cancer research group at GlaxoSmithKline—who’s also committed to making education more accessible for other women from her native country, Pakistan. And she’s a single mom who’s fiercely determined to instill in her child a sense that the world is hers.

In looks and manner, Maham is definitely her mother’s daughter. Slight in frame and remarkably poised, the two tell stories slowly and thoughtfully, with animation. They’re quick to laugh and exude an openness that’s irresistible. But despite these similarities, Maham’s life in West Philadelphia is worlds apart from the life Safia knew as a child and young woman.

Maham’s bedroom paints a picture of a typical preteen American girl. Bottles of body glitter are scattered amidst Hello Kitty paraphernalia, Girls Rule! stickers, a lava lamp and a flock of stuffed animals. Photos torn from teen magazines—Britney

photos by SAFIA FATIMI

Spears, 'N Sync, Leonardo DiCaprio, Harry Potter—are taped to the wall over her bunk bed.

In contrast, Safia grew up in a patriarchal Muslim home in Karachi, Pakistan. At 22, the fifth of seven children, she'd never slept in a room without her sisters. She'd never gone anywhere alone, not even to a friend's house or to school. And other than visits to India, her parents' native country, she'd never been out of Karachi.

It was Safia's love of learning that led her away from the sheltered life she'd known. A stellar student, she'd been receiving scholarships in various subjects, including math and science, since she was in the fifth grade. She became the first woman in her family to go to a university and graduated second in her class. When her Karachi University professors urged her to apply to chemistry graduate schools in the United States, she did so—but in secret.

"I dreamed that I could go, not really believing that I would be allowed to," says Safia, her voice quiet yet commanding as she recalls that turning point in her life. When she was offered a full graduate assistantship by the University of Oklahoma's chemistry and biochemistry department, Safia pleaded with her parents for permission to accept it. After much begging and bargaining, they said yes.

Breaking Tradition

Nervous, scared and alone for the first time, Safia flew to Norman, Oklahoma. She wouldn't be alone for long. Her family had chosen a man from her hometown for her to marry, an arrangement Safia entered willingly because it was the norm in her culture. The wedding itself, though, wasn't quite so ordinary: Safia exchanged vows over the phone with her husband-to-be, who was still in Karachi. After they hung up, Safia's parents threw a big party for the groom and all their family and friends. "I'm probably the only bride in the world who didn't attend her own wedding!" Safia says.

Her assistantship offer included full tuition for her husband, so a week later he joined her in Norman to begin graduate studies in architecture; within a year,



Maham is full of ambitions for her future; her mother just wants her to enjoy doing something honestly and well while making at least a small difference in the world.

Maham was born. But Safia soon discovered that her husband was extremely traditional, with a rigid view of what women could—and should—do.

"As time passed, I realized that the situation threatened my emotional and physical well-being as well as Maham's," says Safia. When she saw an unhappy future unfolding for her daughter, she decided to do the unthinkable for a woman of her upbringing: make it on her own.

This choice came with heavy consequences. Except for a cousin (Aseem Ansari, who nominated her for the Woman of the Year Award from *Working Mother* magazine), Safia had no contact with anyone in her family for several years. In Pakistan, the stigma attached to a woman living without a man is so great that Safia's parents and siblings couldn't provide her with the emotional support she'd always relied on. Suddenly she was more alone than ever.

"She took it very hard," says Ansari, a scientist with Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, about the estrangement. "What inspires me is that she lives her life with such grace. I think it was her desire to make the world a better place for her daughter that gave her the inner strength to pull through."

Safia is quick to point out that the taboo of being a single parent isn't unique to her culture. "When I was at the University of Pennsylvania [for a postdoctoral fellowship], an American colleague said to me, 'Safia, I'm so sorry that you are so young, a single mother, without a man in your life. If I had your life I'd shoot myself.' As upbeat and anchored as I try to be, hearing that hit me like a bowling ball. My answer to her was, 'No, you would not shoot yourself. You would do what needs to be done.'"

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Making It Work

For seven years, doing “what needs to be done” meant adjusting to life in a foreign country while taking care of a young child, attending classes, conducting research and teaching, all on a graduate stipend. “When I think of my schedule then, I can’t believe that I didn’t collapse,” says Safia with a laugh.

She would spend the day in the lab while Maham was in day care; then, after picking her up, feeding her, bathing her and putting her to bed, she’d head back to the lab, sometimes till 2:30 in the morning. If she could, she’d recruit a roommate or fellow student to baby-sit. If not, she’d take a sleeping Maham to the lab with her and lay her down on a foldout chair.

“Life was hectic then,” says Sharmila Rao, a Dallas architect-in-training who



Holder of two OU graduate degrees, Safia Rizvi is part of a GlaxoSmithKline cancer research group analyzing human genome data. In her spare time, she works on her MBA and recruits U.S. corporations to donate computers for women’s learning centers in her native Pakistan.

roomed with Safia and Maham for two years at the University of Oklahoma while earning a 1994 master’s in regional and city planning. “But it helped that Safia has a sense of humor. We managed to

“When I think of my schedule then, I can’t believe that I didn’t collapse.”

have good times. She liked to cook—her chicken curry was really popular—so we entertained a lot.”

Safia, who left OU with a 1990 master’s and 1994 Ph.D. in chemistry, still makes it a priority to surround her small nuclear family with supportive friends and to give Maham a happy home. Their bright, cheery apartment is filled with flowers, candles, piles of *National Geographic*, posters of Einstein (with whom Safia

shares a birthday), and books on literature, poetry, human molecular genetics and chemistry. The walls are adorned with pictures of mother and daughter with various friends or family. With obvious pride, Safia points out a photograph hanging in the front hall: her parents circa 1950, when they were first married. They’re a striking pair, especially her mother, whom Safia closely resembles.

“My mother married at 13, had her first child at 14 and was a grandmother by 38,” says Safia. “My life is so different from what

I had imagined—so very, very different from anything I’d ever seen as a child. I just want Maham to have a positive image as a child of a single mom. And I want to be a role model of a strong woman.”

Family Ties

Safia’s efforts are paying off with Maham—“She’s such a balanced and happy child,” says Ansari—and, more recently, with her family. Her parents, who now live in Toronto, made their first trip to Philadelphia in January 2001.

“With time we have come to see that what happened was okay, because Safia’s brave, intelligent and talented, and she can live without her husband,” says her father (through Safia’s sister-in-law, who translated). “We are proud of her. She lives with courage and is a wonderful mother who takes care of her daughter very well.”

No longer working around the clock, Safia spends her time with Maham tackling homework, playing chess (Maham’s teaching her mom), praying and doing Indian folk dances. Safia’s pride in her heritage is evident in her home: a richly patterned Islamic prayer mat on the wall, wooden chairs and mirrored throw pillows from Pakistan in the living room, a bedspread from India. Surrounded by these ties to the past, mother and daughter make their own way.

Playing with her mom’s long, thick hair, Maham, graceful and lanky in her elementary school uniform, shows off the ‘do’ she’s just created. “Maham’s a real girly-girl, and I couldn’t care less about that stuff,” says Safia, who’s wearing blue jeans, a white collared shirt and no discernible makeup. “But I’m happy to be her Barbie doll.”

She’s there for her daughter in more substantial ways too. “When Maham first started going to school in Philadelphia, she expressed concern because she wasn’t white, she wasn’t black, and she wanted to know where she fit in,” says Safia. “I wanted to make sure she didn’t associate being different with being inferior. So I started to host international evenings.” Once a month, Safia invites friends, colleagues and their kids over for a potluck dinner. She finds speakers from different countries—mostly students and scholars—to present informal talks and to show slides and videos about their homelands. “The children learn to respect

each other's cultures and traditions and see that they should be proud of their own."

An Action Plan

Work is another source of pride for Safia. "It's truly satisfying to be involved in cutting-edge science that will revolutionize how drugs are discovered and the ways cancer patients are treated," she says. "I feel joy that I'm part of a process that's directly related to changing people's lives."

Now she's determined to change even more lives. Specifically, she's helping women in Pakistan gain economic independence by providing them with more opportunities for learning. "I couldn't have accomplished what I did without my education," Safia says. "I've been able to raise my daughter alone simply because I can pay for food and rent. That would not be possible for a lot of women from Pakistan."

Safia set her plan in motion in 1997, after being moved to tears by a speech by Asma Jahangir, a Pakistani attorney and women's rights activist. "There was this woman, fighting a battle on behalf of other women, in the middle of a fundamentalist society—risking her own life, when she could have chosen to live comfortably and think only about herself," says Safia. "I carried a lot of anger about the societal injustice I'd suffered. But Jahangir made me see how lucky I was to be in control of my life and my future. Then I realized how rare that feeling is for so many women from my part of the world, and I decided to do something practical to help."

So she developed a plan to recruit American corporations to donate computers for women's learning centers in Pakistan, and in 1999 she proposed her idea at a Capitol Hill conference about information technology and Pakistan. Arifa Khandwalla, a researcher at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a member of the International Organization of Pakistani Women Engineers (as is Safia), heard Safia speak and was so impressed she volunteered to join forces. "Safia has extraordinary determination and focus,"

says Khandwalla. "Many people talk about doing things for their country. She actually follows through."

Together they're creating the Pakistani Women's Computing Initiative. "Computers are so essential, because even if you're in a small town in Pakistan, the Internet opens up the world to you," says Safia. "But you have to be trained to use them." The two are now seeking funding for this project.

Meanwhile, Safia, who already has a Ph.D., has come up with a new plan for herself: to earn an MBA. "I realized the things I want to do in terms of economic development require a knowledge of business," she says. So she applied to, and was accepted by, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. She hopes her employer will help with the cost.

Ivy Gilbert, an admissions officer for Wharton's MBA program who says she reads hundreds of applications each year, was struck by Safia's intellectual curiosity. "What tremendous inner strength and energy she must have in order to have done so much without a support system," says Gilbert. "Nothing has dampened her zeal for life or her hopes for her daughter or for other Pakistani women. Reading her application, I thought, here's a woman we want associated with our school."

No Problem Too Big

Moving from *How can I help other women?* to *I'll enroll in business school* is typical for Safia. Ever the scientist, her approach to life is to ignore obstacles and systematically break down big problems into workable bits.

Karen Kabnick, a coworker at GlaxoSmithKline, admires Safia's calm demeanor. "When I'm frantic, she'll say, 'We'll just keep on going,' and she gets it all done."

She's teaching her daughter to operate the same way. "When I have a project and I get bored and don't want to do it, or don't think I can, she makes me do it, a little at a time," says Maham. "And then I end up getting an A plus."

Safia also urges Maham to read literature above and beyond her elementary school curriculum (she just finished Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*). "I tell her, 'I

didn't read that until after college, and you read that and you're in fifth grade!' I like to stretch her potential."

Safia's steady determination has enabled her to break several barriers. She was the first female from Pakistan to study crystallography, a process in which researchers use X-ray refraction to view the three-dimensional structure of molecules. She was also the first woman to be invited to speak at a meeting of the Association of Pakistani Scientists and Engineers in North America, an organization almost 20 years old.

"Her work in chemistry was relevant to health and environmental conditions in Pakistan," says G. A. Shirazi, a past president of the association, who invited Safia to speak. "She gave an excellent presentation, and she's become a constant fixture." Since then, other women have presented their research too.

"I'm a dreamer," says Safia. "If something is difficult, I don't let that discourage me. Instead, I think of a solution—and then I worry about how to methodically execute it. When I thought about coming to America, that was a crazy thing to think under my circumstances. But often I'm able to execute my crazy thoughts."

Crazy, maybe. Confident, definitely. It's the perfect combination for Safia, who blends tradition and change, family and career, and even work and play, with apparent ease. "Ever since Maham was a baby, she wanted me to tickle her back to put her to sleep," says Safia. "As she got older, I started to draw things on her back, and she'd guess what I drew. Now I'm teaching her biology on her back. I draw DNA or cells and say, 'Here's the cell wall, here's the nucleus.'"

Despite the early training, one thing that's conspicuously missing from Maham's long list of career possibilities is "scientist." Her mother finds this amusing. "She also knows she doesn't want to be a lawyer," Safia adds with a shrug. "It doesn't matter to me what she does, as long as she enjoys it, does it honestly and is good at it. I want the world to be a better place for her having been here. No matter how small it is, I want my daughter to make a difference." 