

Rosy Santana  
From Veil to Voice

MY CLASSMATE SAT THERE WITH HEAD LOWERED towards her desk. Her hijab made her the target. While I loved learning about her experiences and her Islamic traditions, other students in my middle school feared her differences. The cloth covering her hair became a divider for them, isolating her from the crowd. In our classes, insults and slurs constantly bounced across the walls, ricocheting into her like a bullet, piercing her every core: Terrorist. Bomber. Murderer. I can still feel the venom pouring from those cruel words, weighing heavily upon her.

While I did not wear a hijab, my tongue became my own divider. I was not a native English speaker. My broken English isolated me from others. All my mispronounced words became a deal breaker when it came to building friendships and achieving academic success in my last year of middle school. Thus, I had a hard time speaking up, even when I did not doubt my sentences. Not even the bilingual students were willing to help translate basic words when asked by teachers and staff members. Eventually, I realized that the students feared my differences just as they feared my peer's religion. I understood that their inability to empathize with my difficulties in assimilating at their level came from their fear of becoming an outcast like me.

Over the years, I desperately began searching for local organizations, where I could discuss the most delicate issues which affect ordinary people within my community. I wanted to be part of a space where I could both educate and learn from other people's experiences and cultural backgrounds. I hoped to not only expand my cultural awareness, but I was also interested in the social injustices affecting my peers and the community we shared. I sought spaces where I could write about my experiences and provide a counter-narrative on issues that mattered most for me.

I came across a nonprofit organization called Teen Voices Emerging, which is a safe space for Boston teen girls to discuss gender equality and social justice issues, as well as publish their work as a way to advocate for others. This program gave me the platform to voice my experiences and ideas through my own lens. Through writing, I began to question the negative labels others had imbedded in me. As I learned more about women's rights and human rights, I realized how many young girls went through similar difficulties and the need for our voices to be heard in this society in order to create change.



