

# Leaders Who Look Like Us



Arvin Garg, MD, MPH

From the Department of Pediatrics, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, Mass  
The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Corresponding Author: Arvin Garg, MD, MPH, Department of Pediatrics, University of Massachusetts Medical School, 55 Lake Ave North, S5-856, Worcester, MA 01655-002 (e-mail: [Arvin.Garg@umassmemorial.org](mailto:Arvin.Garg@umassmemorial.org)).  
Received for publication November 24, 2020; accepted April 6, 2021.

ACADEMIC PEDIATRICS 2021;21:1097–1098

ON THE MORNING of November 7, 2020, as I was getting ready to drive to my ten-year-old daughter Samiya's soccer game, I received an exclamatory text from our closest family friend, Abhijay. "Woohoo! Finally called. There is a woman Vice President. And she is Black. And she is Indian." Exhausted since the night of the election, anti-climactic disbelief washed over me and tears welled in my eyes. Kamala Harris' story resonated with my own. Both of our mothers were born in 1938 in India and spent part of their childhood growing up under British rule. When they were nine years old, they witnessed their country gain independence. Both came to America for the purpose of seeking higher education. Our stories then diverge as my parents ultimately decided to settle outside of Boston, MA to pursue the American Dream with aspirations of providing my sister and me more opportunities for a better life.

Yet, growing up South Asian in a predominantly White suburb, my Indian culture and traditions often felt like markers of being different that I was eager to cast off. I was uncomfortable with the smells of Indian spices that would emanate from our kitchen when my friends came over or the accents with which my parents spoke. When my high school English teacher asked me questions about Mahatma Gandhi and Eastern spiritualism in the context of learning about the transcendentalism movement, I feigned ignorance. As a child, all I wanted to do was assimilate into my proximate surroundings and fit in with my friends and peers.

Reflecting back on my childhood, I am now embarrassed by my behaviors, thoughts, and the shame I had regarding my culture and ancestry. However, I also recognize that during my childhood and the ensuing years after I graduated and left my hometown, I had few, if any, teachers, coaches, mentors, or role models who looked like me and could have helped steer me away from these feelings. Beginning in elementary school and ending with medical school, I can only recall two non-White teachers—my first-grade teacher Ms. Yamada and my anatomy teacher whose name I don't recall but who was Indian. This lack of educational leaders or mentors who share my immigrant experience and look like me has unfortunately carried over into my professional career. Although I am definitely not an underrepresented group in medicine, as many South Asians of my generation have become

physicians, all of my leaders in pediatrics to date have been white and predominantly male.

I recently began to ponder what influence this has had subconsciously, and implicitly, on my own career aspirations and opportunities. While the 2020 Election was ramping up in the summer and fall, I began contemplating moving institutions to accept a new leadership position. Despite my great excitement about the opportunity, I had a lot of self-doubts. I questioned whether my shy, reserved, personality could translate into effective leadership. I wished that I had a leader that looked more like me who could share their own lived experience taking on leadership roles in a way that provided me with the confidence (and mentorship) that I too could be in their shoes. I also wished I had a leader that I could relate to and felt comfortable sharing my own insecurities along with my personal and family journeys with.

However, ultimately, three things propelled me to accept the position. The first was the selfless advice of my Chair at my current institution, who has been a mentor to me since I was a medical student. He encouraged me to take the position as a great career opportunity. Second, by taking this position, I felt that I would be honoring my father and his legacy. My father sacrificed his own academic career to follow his strong conviction that my sister and I would have more chances for success in America than if we grew up in India. Taking this leadership position allows me in some small part to carry on his professional dreams.

Finally, I thought of my two daughters. Soon after receiving Abhijay's text on that momentous Saturday morning, and after Samiya's soccer game, I watched Leela (Samiya's older sister) referee her first soccer game. I was already in a joyous mood knowing that my daughters finally have a Vice President and American leader whom they can see themselves in and aspire to be. But, it was really wonderful to see Leela taking charge, commanding the field, and teaching the third-grade girls the rules of the game. One of the players was an Indian girl, and I couldn't help but think about whether seeing someone who looks like Leela as a referee would have an impact on her and nurture her love of soccer. After the game ended, I watched Leela tell one of the little girls that she did a great job playing goalie, and I thought about the

potential impact that those words could have on her. Seeing the effects of Leela's actions provided me with unbridled pride and gratitude, as well as an 'aha' moment. I thought about how I want her and her younger sister Samiya to continue to have confidence in their capacity to be leaders and changemakers. As their father, if I avoided taking on a new leadership role, even with Kamala Harris as Vice President, wouldn't I be subliminally telling my daughters that they should not be leaders as well? And wouldn't they learn more about leadership if I took on this new role and shared with them my thoughts and actions, including my own struggles, joys, and successes?

A few weeks later, I asked Leela and Samiya to reflect and write down what they felt when they heard that Kamala Harris was going to be Vice President. They both decided to text me. Leela texted: "Kamala Harris being our Vice President proves that women, especially

women of color can achieve greatness in America. As a teenage girl myself, I hope to have the opportunity to become as impactful as her." Samiya texted: "When I heard Kamala Harris was gonna be the next Vice President, I felt overjoyed at what she had accomplished. It is an amazing feeling to have someone that looks like you be a leader. In addition, she gave me hope for not only a brighter future, but also for what I could become, she gave me proof that I could be anything if I worked hard at it."

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

*Financial statement:* The author has no financial relationships relevant to this article to disclose.