



LIFE OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

Almas Taj Awan's path in science has been unique. She has quickly travelled from hosting radio and television programmes in her home country of Pakistan to becoming a promising biotechnology researcher with international experience. Her PhD research on using the waste from orange juice production as a source of bioethanol has recently led to her being a finalist in the 2015 GIST (Global Innovation through Science and Technology) Tech-I Competition.

And her career has just begun. Now, she tells her story of what it's like to be a Pakistani scientist in Brazil, and how a PhD fellowship with TWAS enriched her life and made her scientific career possible.

"Really, are you from Pakistan? So where is your burka?"

It's a question I often hear from Brazilian people. Yes, I am Almas, a Pakistani lady; I breathe, I work, I earn an income and I am a significant member of the community where I live, whether it is Pakistan or Brazil.

Unfortunately, the shifting paradigms of the emerging urban Pakistani woman are not highlighted in the media.

Passing all my teenage years as a thoughtful little girl, I finally broke my silence and started sharing my thoughts at university and joined

literary societies. My passion for letting myself be heard took me to a Pakistani radio station where I started my career as a radio show host. I loved my job, and during two to three hours of live shows, it was just me and my voice flying on the FM air waves. In 2007, I got the chance to host shows on the national TV channel, PTV.

These activities were actually hobbies that went alongside with my studies. One of my university professors suggested that I apply for TWAS-CNPq fellowships. I did, and after getting approval by TWAS, I stepped into the country of football, Brazil.

It is said that when you travel you change and will never be the same again. During my PhD programme with the TWAS-CNPq fellowship and later in my post-doc, I presented my scientific work by travelling to 12 countries on five different continents. It proved to be a journey of self-discovery.

That is how I learned to appreciate life, to appreciate different cultures, to be patient with others, to move outside of my comfort zone, to make quick decisions independently, to be a risk taker, and try to live life to the fullest.

My journey from being a media person to a young woman researcher in science from a developing country was a real shift. Nonetheless, with time, I discovered that I can connect them together for community awareness.

It is because of the TWAS fellowship programme that I was able to think outside of the box and develop a much brighter vision. Currently, I am a post-doctoral researcher and I am looking for opportunities to use my skills by working on green scientific technologies and resolving environmental issues. I strongly believe in hope and struggle. Keeping that in mind, life goes on in a better way. ■

