

SPECIAL ARTICLE:

The Next Could Be Me

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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects the dual reality of being a female medical student in Pakistan, where hope and fear coexist. It highlights the aspiration to become a successful doctor while confronting societal pressures, gender-based violence, and systemic barriers. Through a deeply personal narrative, the essay challenges stigma, emphasizes mental resilience, and calls for empathy and change. By shifting the perspective from distant victims to personal vulnerability, it reinforces a powerful message: mental health struggles and societal injustices can affect anyone; the next could be me.

KEYWORDS

Working women, Gender, Women mental health.

"The next could be me..." This phrase both inspires and terrifies a young female medical student like me, in Pakistan. On one hand, it stands for possibility of positivity: women like her *do* achieve the extraordinary. She could be the next glass ceilings shatterer Dr. Sania Nishtar (MBBS '86) - cardiologist and CEO of the global Vaccine Alliance (Gavi)¹. She could be the next Dr. Nafis Sadik, - the first woman ever to head a major UN program². She could be the next steel-women Dr. Mahrang Baloch to inspire younger girls, proving they *can* hold real power.

Women in Pakistan dominates in classrooms by being 70% - so **her being here at all** is a rare success. She pours her blood, sweat, tears and herself to remain dominant, the very fact she is on this path makes her feel she *could be the next* trailblazing doctor or researcher, bridging gaps in a country where culturally female doctors are desperately needed. But the buried question is still there, *why can't she*

dominate herself? Where is she after years? The next is vanished... she is upbringing next Her, waiting for the next could be her! Dreaming for her daughter to be *the next* groundbreaking surgeon or specialist, fulfilling her parents' dreams and earning international awards. Each success on her exams or clinical rounds echoes "*The next could be me*" in pride. She remembers that Pakistan has had women in top positions, so *why not her?* Every step forward reinforces hope that she might become another poster child of possibility.

But the same phrase *also* haunts her with fear. The news reminds her that being a Pakistani woman brings unique dangers and pressures. These worries make her whisper "**The next could be me**" in dread as often as in hope. Consider the darker possibilities:

She could be the next Dr. Shazia Khalid, who could be gang-raped on her duty³, she could be the next Dr. Mehrun Nisa, who could be get killed by her own husband and in-laws⁴, She could be the next successful doctor facing false smear allegations of immoral relations, she could be the next Nimrita Chandani, to commit suicide⁵. Such recurrent incidences fuel her nightmares: she wonders, *what if I'm next?*

If not that bad, then she fears to be the next one among those 85% female doctors who quit within 5-10 years of graduation, or among those 20% graduates who never practiced, she could be the next "doctor bride", she could be asked to treat her medical degree as just a bride-price symbol⁶. She fears she could be *the next* brilliant doctor pressured into early marriage, her career shelved by tradition.

The fear isn't abstract. In Pakistan, stories of female doctors suffering violence make her heart pound. A case like Aafia Siddiqui's looms large: Siddiqui was a talented neuroscientist imprisoned abroad on controversial charges. Pakistani media widely report she has been beaten, sexually assaulted, and denied medical care in custody⁷. This feeds the terror that even a top female professional can become a

victim. She imagines hearing a knock at the door: *"The next could be me,"* not as a doctor but as a target of crime or injustice.

All around her, men still dominate. In Pakistani *"patriarchal and male-dominated,"* society where women's ambitions are often belittled. Many of her male classmates casually say quotas for women aren't needed because "women should sacrifice jobs for men". Sometimes relatives question why she bothers with medicine at all. Every time someone asks when she'll marry, she feels *"The next could be me"* - the next to be deemed an inconvenience for working.

Caught between these extremes, she carries an enormous mental burden. Each day begins and ends with the mantra *"The next could be me."* A morning achievement - a good grade or completing a long night shift, prompts her to think, *maybe I am meant to lead, to heal.* But each evening, a news headline or whispered rumor can flip it: *maybe I'm next in danger.* From these dilemmas she does not emerge broken but psychiatrically stronger: her fear sharpens her awareness of mental-health. She becomes a student of her own mind: clinically literate about risk, brave enough to reach for support, and stubborn enough to keep returning to the work of healing. If *the next could be me*, then let it be the me who knows how to survive, recover, and help others do the same.

She refuses to give in to fear. Like her girl mates, she tries to be resilient. She finds strength in solidarity, in speaking up, in **building resilience**, in seeking help, in acknowledging her feelings, in little small forward steps. She finds strength in *Herself and in her mindset.* She reminds herself of the women who came before - those who conquered impossible odds. Every success story she hears reinforces her resolve: the next could indeed *be* her, on her own terms.

Every night, exhausted yet determined, she whispers once more: *"The next could be me."* It is a warning, yes, but also a declaration of defiance. She will carry this phrase as both caution and inspiration.

Because if it must echo in her mind at every step, then let it be a promise that when the time comes, *the next success story in medicine will be her.*

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