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She had the kind of smile that made you think she had never met pain.

She had the kind of eyes that that made you think she had dreams - and that the dreams had a chance of coming true.

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I was in the third semester of medical college and was headed to the hospital for my very first clinical posting. As soon as I entered the ward I could sense chaos in the air – so unlike the order and structure of my preclinical semesters.

I was anxious, walking as fast as I could, hoping I wouldn't be late for the bedside class. After some time I noticed that a young girl had been following me the whole time, from just outside the ward right up to the bedside. I decided to approach her but when I turned around she was gone!

Her appearance and disappearance continued over the next two days and I wondered if she was an illusion – a bright-eyed, smiling illusion; however, the next day my friend and I discovered that she was as real as we were, and quite delighted to talk to us.

Sana, as she was called, was thirteen years old but already a mother to three younger sisters. As we talked, I learned that she, along with her sisters, had been living in the hospital corridors for the last two months. Sana divided her time between nursing her mother who was being treated for chronic kidney disease and taking care of her three siblings. I found out that there was little hope for the mother's survival; their father, a daily wage worker, had left them on their own and rarely visited.

I have read about feminism; as people debate about the issues involved, I wonder when and how, if ever, the struggle for political, economic, personal, and social rights for women will reach Sana and advance her situation - improve her life. How would a girl with no education support her sisters in her patriarchal world?

Sana doesn't know what feminism is – she doesn't even know she has rights – yet how cheerfully and unquestioningly she has taken on the responsibility of caring for her mother, and her sisters, the responsibility that is rightfully her father's. I never met him the entire week that I visited Sana in the ward. Even when I sought his consent to use the photograph of his daughters for this narrative, he referred the matter to Sana's uncle because he couldn't spare the time.

I couldn't get Sana out of my mind. Had she, the first born, been a son, would they still have had four children to raise? Would their condition have been different - would their father have abandoned them? Would he have cherished his wife if she had borne him a son? Would I have written this article if Sana had been a boy?

Though I had expected it, I was distressed when I learned that Sana's mother passed away within a week after discharge. I hope the mother realised what a fabulous, courageous daughter she had – one who blurred the line that society draws to discriminate between a son and a daughter - who despite the responsibilities, sadness, and lack of support, kept smiling. I hope it was easier for the mother to know in her last days on earth that she had such a daughter.

I would like to believe that Sana will hold out against the patriarchal paradigm; yet every now and then, I worry. What if her strength wavers, her dreams shatter, or she breaks - who will hold her hand? I may never know.

Learning in medicine is multifaceted - some things you learn from teachers; others from books; yet others you can only see and feel – Sana made me realise that "sometimes when we're in the darkest places, we find the brightest light".

This one week in the hospital was unforgettable, extraordinary, inspiring, and shattering – all at the same time.