

“Getting in the door is actually what I’m most proud of”, Rana Hussain tells me over Zoom from her home in Melbourne. We’ve been discussing her career within the AFL system, as well as as a writer and broadcaster in sports media.

“I felt even more proud because once I got inside the industry, I realised just what a minority I actually was. So, me just being me in an environment where I was a minority was doing the work in and of itself.”

Hussain’s most forward-facing role is as one of the ten women who make up ABC’s all-female footy podcast, *The Outer Sanctum*. Off-air, she’s also a consultant on the #DoMore project, an initiative headed up by Australian NBA player Ben Simmons, and is a member of The Anti-Racism Advisory Committee, a group of subject matter experts who were put together to help Collingwood Football Club implement the recommendations from the *Do Better* report.

But even before she officially had roles, sport always played a position in the background of her life. She was born in Melbourne to migrant parents who came to Australia from India in the early 70s and grew up in a Muslim household where cricket was always on the **TV**. Australian Football had a presence in her home too but rather as a background figure. “Footy wasn’t **ever** our game; it was their game, Australia’s game, not ours,” she explains. “But we still watched it because it was like, ‘well, this is what everybody watches.’”

Then, years later, Hussain did end up falling victim to the AFL-bug when a friend took her to see the Western Bulldogs play the Melbourne Demons at the MCG, “I fell in love with the atmosphere; with the game”. That and a then-crush on Melbourne’s Russel Robertson.

Yet it hasn’t always been the most accessible place as a fan from a marginalised community. Before prayer rooms were introduced in AFL venues in 2012, she tells me, “we were praying in the bowels of the MCG where there’s **spilt** beer and like people looking at you and you feel really vulnerable”.

“I remember that day [that prayer rooms were announced],” she says. “You know, as always, it was a story in the news and Jeff Kennett [former Premier and media commentator] talked about how ridiculous it was that there was a prayer room and was pandering. I just remember feeling like, ‘Oh, I wish you could understand, you love footy and we do too, it just makes it more accessible for us’.”

Since then, she’s found a career in actively working to dismantle structures of inequality within the industry, including both cultural and systemic, such as disparities in gender equity, systemic racism and the intersection between them, and making the code a more accessible and inclusive space.

For Hussain, the first step in tackling systemic racism in sporting clubs and organisations is addressing the lack of diversity on and off-field and making minorities or people from marginalised communities feel safe once they’re in the system. She believes that instead of holding power and letting others access it, power needs to be distributed equitably.

“I think a lot of this work started with, ‘oh well, the answer to our problems is just to get different people from different backgrounds in our organisations’. But that’s not going to change anything because all you’re doing is putting different types of people into a system that will make them feel lesser than and will set them up not to succeed,” she explains.

Instead, legitimate power needs to be given to people from marginalised communities and minorities and putting them in decision-making roles, such as in administration and leadership. For example, “We see in football an over-representation of Indigenous players in the men’s game on-field [compared to the general population] but that’s not really mirrored in the administration when it comes to the AFL clubs and in the AFL itself.”

The, the [remove one of the ‘the’] questions need to be asked and addressed: “Are there structural or systemic barriers for them to succeed. Do they feel safe? Do they feel represented and able to do their jobs to the best of their ability?”. Instead of just getting people in the door, she explains, it must be imperative that once they’re in, “they can do so safely and thrive and feel like they belong without having to really change who they are.”

It’s work she’s proud of. At Richmond, she led a diversity and inclusion action plan, which as she starts to explain it to me, her eyes light up. This is where **the** real work gets done. “It’s actually what you need to do to change things,” she says. “Set yourself some targets, put your name to something and say ‘this is what we want to do’ and hold yourself accountable.”

“The process of just creating that plan was the most useful piece of work I think I’ve done because it meant we all had to do some learning, we all had to have conversations about what does inclusion really **mean**, what does it look like on a tangible level, what are the specific things we’re going to do’.”

She also explains that racism needs to be talked about and addressed in the conversations and plans for gender equality in sports. In the pursuit of making spaces equitable for all women, “you’re going to come up against racism at some point”. Which, she notes, is true for ableism, homophobia and all the different things women face too.

“It comes back to the fact that we didn’t build it inclusively,” she explains. “And so of course now, if you’re shoehorning women into a really rigid system that exists, it’s only going to accommodate for white women...When I see gender equity targets that aren’t actually for anybody else, or addressing structural racism as well, then I think, ‘oh, well you don’t actually mean for me’.”

Along with the challenges her work can often entail, her career is also full of a lot of love, moments of joy and connection. When after doing a guest spot on *The Outer Sanctum* podcast years ago, the original women of the podcast asked her to join them as a permanent member, “‘I really love doing this’ and so, now broadcasting is another love for me.”

“It’s given me a place to belong; a group of people who get me and get the way I see the world, and a place to unpack a lot the stuff that can really **be** tricky and frustrating.”

When I ask her what she wants the future of Australian football to look like in this country, she tells me, “I want equality of opportunity at every level. So, people don’t have to play or love football to feel like they’re an Australian but if they decide they want to, they should have every opportunity and ability to do so.

“That could be the young, Muslim girl at home who aspires to be the CEO. She should look at the game and think, ‘I could do that’ rather than ‘that’s not the place for me’. That’s what I hope for footy in Australia.”