

ALBA-IBRO Podcast Miniseries: Episode 1

Transcript

Dr Asma Bashir: Hello world, and welcome to the ALBA-IBRO Podcast Miniseries, a programme that brings a global and intersectional approach to hot topics in equity, diversity, and inclusion in neuroscience. The miniseries delves deeper into the knowledge and expertise shared at the ALBA-IBRO events at three major conferences in 2023, to make these valuable insights accessible to all.

Through exclusive interviews and engaging discussions, each episode uncovers the layers of complexity surrounding the topics covered at the events

The events and this podcast are supported by the International Brain Research Organization (IBRO), and I'm your host, Dr Asma Bashir, the founder of Her Royal Science.

For our first episode, we're coming to you from the 16th International Conference of the Society of Neuroscientists of Africa (SONA) held in Johannesburg, where ALBA and IBRO organised a mentoring workshop on leadership in collaboration with World Women in Neuroscience and the Southern African Neuroscience Society. I'm excited to be speaking with three researchers located on the African continent about mentorship and what they've learnt on their journey towards being the mentors they are today. In particular, we will be discussing the role of mentoring in career advancement and capacity development in Africa.

I'll be chatting with Dr Sara Elfarrash, Dr Royhaan Folarin, and Dr Lihle Qulu. Let's start with some brief introductions: Dr Elfarrash, who are you and what do you study?

(01'12) Dr Sara Elfarrash: My name is Sara Elfarrash. I'm an Assistant Professor of Physiology at Faculty of Medicine, Mansoura University. I'm currently working in neurodegenerative diseases where we basically work on different spectrums of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease. We are trying to conduct some mouse studies and some translational human [studies]. And so far, this is it.

Dr Asma Bashir: Okay, sounds great! And how about you, Dr Folarin: who are you and what do you study?

Dr Royhaan Folarin: Hi, Asma. Thank you very much for inviting me, and hello to all our listeners across the world. I'm Dr Royhaan Folarin, a neuroscientist and fellow of the African Science Literacy Network. I'm based at the Olabisi Onabanjo University in Nigeria, where I lecture anatomical sciences to postgraduate and undergraduate students of various health sciences, including anatomy, medicine, nursing, and pharmacy. I lead the Group for Biopsychiatric Research and Innovative Neuroscience, acronymed as G-BRAIN, where we investigate the pathogenetic mechanisms of some neuropsychiatric disorders like schizophrenia and ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], as well as some neurodegenerative disorders like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, using mice and *Drosophila* models.

Our intent is to understand some natural compounds that have been identified as potential alternatives to currently-known synthetic antipsychotics, so we want to understand how these natural compounds achieve their neuroprotective effects as well. Thank you.

Dr Asma Bashir: Awesome! And Dr Qulu, who are you and what do you study?

Dr Lihle Qulu: Thank you, Asma. I am a neuroscience researcher who holds an academic post at Stellenbosch University as a senior lecturer. Like Dr Royhaan, I also teach undergraduate students, but I also supervise postgraduate students. My research interest is translational, like

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Dr Sara, but I focus more on sexual violence; we have a rat model, and we also look at humans, where we visit a prison—one of the biggest prisons in KZN [KwaZulu Natal], one of the provinces in South Africa. And we have interviews, and now we are moving into looking at biological samples and changes that may be common in convicted rapists and see if we can see something similar with our rat model. I'm passionate about mentoring, and I'm really happy to be here.

(04'01) Dr Asma Bashir: I'm happy to have you! Thank you all for sharing a little bit about your work. Though I'd love to hear more about your respective projects, today, the topic is mentorship. I wanted to start us off by talking about what makes a good mentor. Can each of you describe the characteristics that make someone a successful mentor in your eyes?

Dr Royhaan Folarin: I believe that a good mentor, after equipping him or herself with the necessary professional capabilities for the job, must be somebody that has the best vision for his mentees' career advancement and fulfilment. He's therefore somebody that is willing to always lend guidance, while most importantly also taking cognizance of the respective circumstances that may influence his mentees' perspectives, things like their background, things they've been used to. [A good mentor] harnesses all of this understanding around his mentees to make his judgments and also to offer his advice and point them in the right direction. Rather than just handing down the instruction, he's a good listener that points them in the direction while customising, so to speak, the instructions based on things he understands around his students' or mentees' capabilities.

Dr Sara Elfarrash: I think there is no specific recipe for a good mentor, but I would say that good mentors should be really flexible. The field is very dynamic, everything is changing, so maybe he needs to be really flexible, depending on the mentee, depending on the project, depending on [at] which stage his student is. The mentee by the end of his journey doesn't really need to be a copy of himself [the mentor]. I think accepting this would make me, or maybe from my perspective, a good mentor.

(06'13) Dr Asma Bashir: That's beautiful. How about you, Lihle? What do you say makes a good mentor?

Dr Lihle Qulu: Just to add on what Dr Sara said, I think holistically just giving honest feedback, being honest with your mentee when they are not doing something correctly, or maybe if they are moving towards a path that is not going to necessarily lead them to their ultimate goal. It's so important to give them honest feedback because those can be the building blocks that they use in the future to avoid some of the mistakes that you as a mentor have made, or mistakes that you've seen other people make.

(07'06) Dr Asma Bashir: Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Well, each of you are mentors in similar ways, funnily enough. I'm wondering if you could think of a time when you actually struggled to mentor a junior trainee or a student, if you don't mind sharing what that situation was and how you improved that situation for not only yourself, but also for the person that you were mentoring.

Dr Lihle Qulu: I've actually had a very recent situation!

Dr Asma Bashir: Oh, did you?

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Dr Lihle Qulu: Yes! I have a mentee who is very talented, very great leader, but my mentee kind of struggled with keeping time, [was] overly occupied, and half the time they would struggle with meeting deadlines or keeping their word. This was a big struggle because it's not easy to call somebody out when they already approach you and say, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry!' but this is a repeated thing. What I did is on the last mishap they made, I said, 'Okay, why don't you sit down? I want us to have an honest conversation. Do you want to reflect on how you conduct yourself when it comes to your work, to your friends? Do you want to reflect on your strengths as well as your challenges?' Because I don't like using negative words such as 'weakness,' but 'challenges.' I started the conversation off by actually telling the mentee all the strong and beautiful things they have, and then I invited them to now reflect, 'what are the threats that could make these amazing things that you have become diluted or distorted or short change you with the progress?' I found it so effective that when you bring a mentee to reflect [is] so much easier than when you do the job yourself and you push them to hear what you see. They do a better job in reflecting themselves and saying, 'Actually, I'm at a loss here. I need to improve this.' And then you ask them how, so they become more responsible for their own progress [rather] than making you the one responsible to tell them how to progress.

(09'31) Dr Asma Bashir: Royhaan, do you have something similar in your experience as a mentor? Or do you have something completely different that came to mind when I asked the question about a challenging time mentoring someone?

Dr Royhaan Folarin: Oh, yeah. And I really like the point on which Lihle started. In fact, with this question, I feel I should start keeping a diary now <chuckle>, because the students will not all exhibit the same attitude or disposition, you know? There will be diversity in the way they respond to mentorship, and there is usually one common denominator in my observation, and that's the fact that each person is always a product of what background he or she has, or what experiences they have undergone before coming under your mentorship. One usually needs to hear from the students, from these mentees. What's their perspective? Why do you think that what we are [doing] now is necessary? How does this mentor-mentee relationship fit into that, and where do you see yourself in the future? If this thing we're doing here is one of those things you think fits into your legacy, then perhaps these are the paths you need to tow in order to achieve that. Trying to hear their perspective has always been very helpful in my navigating whatever challenges arise during the mentorship process.

(11'03) *Did you know ALBA means dawn or sunrise in several Latin languages? It recognises that our scientific communities are beginning to acknowledge the importance of incorporating diversity and ensuring equity in the way we deal with science. ALBA was created to fight existing and persisting inequities in academia around the globe, causing the attrition of talent, particularly of researchers from underrepresented groups. Discover all of the Network's activities on the ALBA website, www.alba.network.*

(11'38) Dr Asma Bashir: Given that ALBA is very committed to ED&I [equity, diversity, and inclusion], I wanted to make sure that we discuss the extra considerations that each of you take when mentoring students who have different backgrounds than you, for instance, or different life experiences. I'll start with Sara. What does DEI in mentorship mean to you? What do you do to create inclusive spaces for the individuals that you're mentoring? You can give an example if you like, related to your own region, or your lab based in Cairo, I believe.

Dr Sara Elfarrash: So, the lab is based in Mansoura, but there is not [a lot of] difference between Cairo and Mansoura, I would assume. I think the diversity that [I'm] trying to achieve in my lab or with my collaborators is the idea of multidisciplinary research. In the field of

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neuroscience, most of us have either medical or paramedical backgrounds from science, pharmacy, biology, or medicine. We're a step behind in inclusion of students with engineering backgrounds or computer science backgrounds. Probably in my case, I don't feel comfortable supervising them because I'm not good at that. So, I think this is the thing. Also, bioinformaticians, I really would like to have in my lab, but also I feel that, 'Okay, how would I supervise them if I'm really into the field?' I think this is something that I would really like to work on in the future.

(13'24) Dr Asma Bashir: Okay, how about we go to Lihle next? I'm imagining that because South African society at large does mirror, at times, North American society in terms of class and race and ethnicity, if you have any thoughts on inclusion, especially in the space of academia. Have you noticed that labs are more diverse as the years go by and people feel like they can come from any socioeconomic background and thrive in the academic setting?

Dr Lihle Qulu: Yes. I think South Africa has improved a lot if I compare it [to] the time I was doing my honours until now, having my own lab, I think there's been a lot of improvements. But I also like how Sara said, 'Inclusion is not only about gender or race, it's also about the discipline you're coming from.' In our case though, as you've mentioned, Asma, the diversity in South Africa is so huge. We have students that are coming from outside of South Africa but from Africa, we have students that are coming from outside of the continent. And then we have different religions, then we have different races, then we have different socioeconomic backgrounds. It is so important to deal with each student. It's important to know the student's background, where they come from. before you just jump in and say, 'Okay, we are doing this with you.' That really plays a massive role.

I think an example of inclusion that I've had to adjust to would be religion, with a Jewish student, which is not as highly practiced in South Africa. Jews tend to have holidays that I didn't even know about, so I have found this such a beautiful learning curve to understand the culture of kosher, the kind of food they have to eat. When we are having a gathering, we have to make sure that we've ordered a kosher meal. We have to make sure that if, for example, there is a certain meeting we have to have, and it falls under a certain important religious belief of one of my students, we have to cancel that day and take another day that actually will include that particular person and not force our way and say, 'Oh well, you just need to deal with it.' I think for me, that's been a big area of inclusion. But I think that our lab is well-diverse as we have males, females, different races, different backgrounds. And I want to believe we're happy!
<Laugh>

(16'28) Dr Asma Bashir: <Laugh> One of the conversations that sometimes even I forget to include when it comes to DEI and often gets forgotten, is the idea of accessibility, so whether or not you have individuals who might be disabled or neurodivergent in your lab, do you have special precautions that you try to make sure you implement to make sure that anyone with different levels of ability also can join your lab?

Dr Lihle Qulu: I would say that—Oh, are you asking me or Royhaan, or...

Dr Asma Bashir: Actually, anybody can answer! So, yeah, how about you go first? I don't mind.

Dr Lihle Qulu: Ah, okay. I think that is such an important point, Asma, because we tend to think that when we are speaking of inclusion and diversity, as long as you have every organ in your body working and your brain functional, then you qualify. But I'm proud to be in an institution that accommodates that, from the way we've built our structures to even the way that we've

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brought in accessibility to our facilities and our programs. It is inclusive to make sure that should you have a student with special needs, they will be catered for. But at a personal direct level in my lab, I haven't had such an experience.

(17'46) Dr Asma Bashir: Okay. How about you, Sara or Royhaan? Have you had the experience of having to mentor someone who did have some accessibility challenges? And if so, what worked for you in making sure that you created an inclusive environment for that student?

Dr Sara Elfarrash: For me, it doesn't really happen as a research team. I think it's more like an institutional thing at the Faculty of Medicine. But I think this is something that didn't really reach research labs. It's not a very competitive field. It's not a very shiny field to get involved in until this stage <laugh>.

(18'29) IBRO aims to bring neuroscience to the world through its international career development support for neuroscientists at all career stages. Founded in 1961, IBRO represents a vibrant community of over 90,000 neuroscientists around the world. IBRO places equity and inclusion at the heart of its programs, and works with partners such as the ALBA Network to make neuroscience a more inclusive and equitable domain.

(19'00) Dr Asma Bashir: I was wondering if we could talk about some of the mentoring initiatives that you have either in your institution or more broadly in your region. If you can't think of anything that you've used as a resource to support your mentorship, what do you wish you had available to you? Let's start with Lihle! I think we've lost Royhaan, so I'll wait for him to come back, but let's continue the conversation and hopefully he'll join in the next few minutes.

Dr Lihle Qulu: Okay, so we have recently started, and I'm really excited to be a part of the team that initiated having mentorship for all the postgraduate students in our division, but at this point we don't have enough manpower. What we decided was that each faculty member is going to be given a certain number of students, maybe you'll be responsible for about five students as a faculty member. Then, once a month or whatever amount of time you and the students decide you want to have, you sit down and you have a conversation about their challenges and anything that they're having issues with, and you then invite them, that if you want to have a one-on-one, you can extend mentorship.

What we've also done is we have opened up peer mentoring. So, I know that internationally a lot of people don't have what we call in South Africa an honours program. Most universities internationally have a four-year degree, but we have a three-year degree, and then we have an [optional] fourth year, which is another separate certificate known as an honours degree. So, the honours students are being introduced to research, and they also experience a lot of challenges. We tend to pair up the honour students, for example, with the Master's students, and then the Master's and PhD students will be paired up with the faculty members. I find that it's an exciting program and the students have really received it very well. There is a lot of movement happening towards making sure that we are visible in the space of mentoring or mentorship in our country.

Dr Asma Bashir: Sara, would you like to share anything from either your institution or more broadly in North Africa that you're aware of in the space of mentorship, something to support people who are interested in going into mentorship?

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Dr Sara Elfarrash: We have the same institutional model that Lihle has been describing when it comes to undergrad and postgrad students. I think what I really want to add is that, as a faculty member or as a PhD student at earlier stages of our life, we don't get some kind of education of how we should be doing the mentoring. Maybe the point is that not all PhD students will be a faculty member or in the position of mentoring students, but maybe the availability of these courses could make things better, so we don't really need to go through the trial-and-error process when I'm mentoring some students <laugh>.

(22'28) Dr Asma Bashir: Yeah, that makes sense. Royhaan, sorry about the line getting dropped, but we'll just jump right back in. I'll ask the question if you don't mind. I'm wondering if you might be able to speak to any initiatives in Nigeria or in the surrounding area that support mentors and people who want to become better mentors. If there aren't any initiatives that you can speak on, what do you wish you had at your disposal?

Dr Royhaan Folarin: Thank you. I think the matter is simply as I heard Sara discuss it. Usually, you get to learn on the job, you learn on the drill in this kind of profession of ours. It's not so easy to come by mentorship programs for the mentors, right? Usually, what plays out is, what kind of mentorship did you as an upcoming mentor receive during your training? And to what extent and how far have you gone in improving yourself in developing your mentorship skills? How well have you capacitated yourself? That's usually how it has been, such that you probably could have undergone the worst kind of training in the sense that maybe you didn't receive as much mentorship as you would have desired, but you could work on yourself to ensure that you fill in the holes, you cover up for the gaps, and then you'll ensure that those who will be coming under your mentorship receive a much better experience.

At the Science Communication Hub Nigeria, our mission also includes fostering collaborations between upcoming scientists, younger scientists, and established PIs [principal investigators] amongst others. This fosters a mentor-mentee relationship, such that a younger scientist identifies prospective mentors through our database of Nigerian scientists across different and diverse disciplines. Also, very recently, I was invited to represent the Science Communication Hub Nigeria at a workshop by the Nigerian Academy of Science, where another mentor-mentee long-term collaboration exercise was also inaugurated. So, this seems to be gaining more waves and it's becoming a priority—support programs for prospective mentors on how to become better mentors. And I hope it's going to continue to be like that or get better.

(25'03) *Become an ALBA member; it is free! You will have access to a diverse network of neuroscientists across the globe, have the opportunity to drive initiatives as an ALBA Volunteer, and participate in advocacy training workshops.*

(25'23) Dr Asma Bashir: I want to thank you all for sharing your wonderful perspectives. I like to end conversations with gratitude and shout-outs. I'd love to hear if you have any examples of a mentor that comes to mind who played a pivotal role in your own careers. Is there someone that you'd like to acknowledge at this time?

Dr Royhaan Folarin: My special shout-out [is] to Professor Thomas K Adenowo. He imbued in me dedication, hard work, and the concept of diligence at work. I really enjoyed working with him. My kudos also to Dr Philemon D Shallie. He is another person in whom I have seen the value of always being positive, regardless of what negative factors come in. My PhD times were quite challenging, so people like him as a senior colleague, and then people like Professor Ahmed Adedeji, a pharmacologist, were always there nudging me forward, encouraging me. Most importantly, a friend, a brother, and a very great mentor of mine—that's Dr Mahmoud

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Bukar Maina. I want to thank them all for being part of my journey. They all remind me in one way or another of someone I like to be.

Dr Asma Bashir: Thank you for sharing that. Sara, would you mind going next? Is there someone who has shaped you and has been a supportive mentor to you throughout your career?

Dr Sara Elfarrash: My journey has been a bit of a long one, but I'm really grateful to my PhD Supervisor Poul Henning Jensen from Aarhus University, Denmark. He taught me to think about the idea first rather than the cost. I mean, I'm thinking definitely about the cost now, working from Egypt, but I think it's also, you know, shaping my mentality regarding, 'Let's think about the idea, let's formulate it, then we will figure out next how we'll cover that.' He also taught me that data speaks much more loudly than anything else, and we need to get passionate about science, not passionate about the publication.

Also, mentoring is a process because, as I mentioned, we don't really get too much education about how to mentor. [My mentorship has] actually continued after coming back to Egypt as a postdoctoral [researcher], [with] Mohamed Salama from American University in Cairo, and Hilal Lashuel from EPFL [École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne]. Now, they're turning into collaborators, but they're still mentoring me. It's completely a privilege! <Chuckle> But I think their support and the understanding to the nature of our region, how we need to be realistic so we can work smart rather than working hard, I think this is something that I keep learning from them, and in one way or another, I'm trying also to share all of [their lessons] with my students.

Dr Asma Bashir: Thank you for sharing that, Sara. Lihle, it's your turn. Is there someone that you want to shout out?

Dr Lihle Qulu: Yes, definitely! My honours up to PhD supervisor, Professor Musa Mabandla. The things that he has exposed me to with his mentoring are actually endless, but I'm really grateful about how he taught me the importance, almost like Sara, of focusing on science and not significance of data <chuckle>, because sometimes it just becomes about the p-value and you lose the authenticity of your finding. I don't know how many people must have lost the authenticity of their finding because they were trying to force a p-value that is significant. He taught me the importance of having integrity and ethics. Another thing was exposing me to teaching, and he would tell me to set up an exam question, and when I set up the exam question, he would sit down with me and ask, 'What are you trying to say here? Do you think the student is going to understand?' <Chuckle> Half the time, his voice still rings in my head almost seven years later, but he's one of the mentors I will always hold very, very dear in my heart because he's played a massive role in assisting to shape me to be the kind of person I am today when it comes to my career.

(30'06) Dr Asma Bashir: I think it's so beautiful to be able to look at the past as you all are mentoring in your own ways, and I think it's remarkable as well to realise how much your mentorship styles are influenced by your own mentors. I imagine your students have already started to be influenced by your own styles and the cycle just continues.

I want to take this moment to say thank you to each of you, Dr Elfarrash, Dr Folarin, and Dr Qulu.

Dr Royhaan Folarin: Thank you.

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Dr Sara Elfarrash: Thank you so much.

Dr Lihle Qulu: Thank you so much!

Dr Asma Bashir: And for our closing remarks, I'm delighted to be joined by Mathilde Maughan, the Project and Network Manager at the ALBA Network, and Dr Keerthana Iyer, the Partnerships and Development Manager, also at the ALBA Network. I'm wondering what your overall thoughts are on this lovely conversation that we've just had with our guests.

Mathilde Maughan: First of all, I think we were so thrilled to hear all of those constructive ideas that our guests had about mentoring. One thing I think we can acknowledge is that being a good mentor is an extremely tough job especially in neuroscience where the field is moving so fast. What I really enjoyed is hearing our guests talk about the fact that you need to be flexible as a mentor, and I think that can lead to being a truly inclusive mentor. We've had experience from other speakers and ALBA members telling us that sometimes you have no idea what the person you're mentoring is experiencing, what their background is, where they come from, what their culture is, and therefore it is sometimes very hard to take the appropriate behaviour. ALBA can help with that, maybe Keerthana wants to tell us about this.

Dr Keerthana Iyer: A few of the panellists brought up the issue of mentors themselves sometimes struggling to provide appropriate guidance or support or even constructive feedback, and this could be one of the reasons why some of the existing mentoring programs may not be as successful or impactful. And it is sometimes a struggle to have the mentee's specific needs met, given how the needs could be so different across regions with really context-specific factors, such as language or socioeconomic status. This kind of gives me a good segue into an upcoming ALBA activity, which is an online fireside chat series that we're organising to understand what's not working in existing mentoring programs, and also to listen to the unmet mentorship needs of diverse students and early-career neuroscientists. We're planning to organise three sessions, one per month starting in September, and we're also mindful of rotating time zones, so each session will be organised to the convenience of people in different regions. We encourage you to look into the ALBA website for more information on this.

Dr Asma Bashir: Alright, and that's www.alba.network. Another point that I'm really interested to hear your thoughts on is the way in which our audience can improve their workspaces and create inclusive workplaces if they can't necessarily attend one of your events. Is there a takeaway that you wish to impart on our listeners here today?

Mathilde Maughan: Well, that comes to a point that I wanted to address, which is that we've talked about mentors, we've talked about mentees, but this is always taking a very individualistic perspective. I think it's also important to look at the responsibility of the institutions and the structure we evolve in. You have a hard time being an inclusive mentor if you are not in an inclusive background and institution that gives you the means to do so. I think, first of all, looking at places where they have undertaken actions that can contribute to having a more inclusive environment and inclusive mentoring programs is important. And to that end, we have a massive database of resources and best practices on the ALBA website that people can go have a look at.

Dr Asma Bashir: Yeah, I'm hoping that whoever's listening to this, if they have any amount of power to implement these programs on an institutional level, that they do take heed and they recognise that though DEI can look different around the world, it is often the neurotypical and the able-bodied, as well as the more privileged in our society, that even gets the opportunity to

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consider a career in STEM academia. I do think it's also on all of us to make sure that we create spaces that are inclusive and equitable in the hopes that that will translate into diversity in everyone's working environment. I also really appreciate the work that ALBA's been doing over the last few years to make it as easy as possible to provide support and learning opportunities for anyone who's interested in becoming the best mentors or even the best mentees possible.

(35'57) Mathilde Maughan: I completely agree with you, and I think that doing these outreach activities that ALBA is doing is also sharing different versions of what can be a good mentor and an inclusive mentor. Therefore, we've taken actions into advertising different types of role models as well. Because everybody's biased, when we tend to describe a good mentor, we mostly end up imagining that person as a man, as this is the most common role model that we see out there. But ALBA is really trying to show that there is diversity among neuroscientists.

Dr Keerthana Iyer: While we acknowledge that some languages across the globe are gender neutral or genderless, ALBA would still like to emphasise the importance of being mindful of using inclusive language when referring to a mentor and that a good mentor could go by any pronoun, he, she, or they, and it's probably best to stick to a neutral pronoun as 'they' in all contexts.

Dr Asma Bashir: I love that. I think that's something that people can even do outside of the context of academia, and I really do appreciate you mentioning that. I want to say thank you to both of you for your very insightful remarks. And I'd like to thank the audience as well for listening to the very first episode of the ALBA-IBRO Podcast Miniseries. I'm Dr Asma Bashir, and it's been a pleasure to guide you through this conversation. This podcast is organised with support from IBRO, which is a founding member of the ALBA Network, and the ALBA Network aims to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion to counteract bias and fight discrimination in brain research. For more information on this podcast, visit www.alba.network. Thank you.

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