

Islam and women's education

Toni Feder's Q&A with Sola Mahfouz ("Physics was her ticket out of Afghanistan," *PHYSICS TODAY* online, 24 August 2023) made for a delightfully inspiring reading—so much so that I emailed it to my six nieces (two physicists, two doctors, and two dentists) and would have included my three sisters (a physicist, an accountant, and a banker, all retired) had they had email addresses. All are in a Muslim-majority developing country that has suffered for decades on account of wars and sanctions.

In defying restrictions on the education of young girls, Mahfouz follows in the footsteps of education activist Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize recipient. Mahfouz is from Afghanistan, where girls 12 and up have been barred from returning to school since September 2021 and women have been forbidden from attending universities since December 2022. The restrictions are a regression after two decades of progress—the number of women and girls enrolled in Afghan schools, for example, had increased tenfold between 2001 and 2018.¹

I would like to point out, though, that the Afghan authorities' attitude toward the education of women is not indicative of the teachings of Islam and gives the faith an undeservedly bad name.

Let us start with the Muslim scripture, the Koran. The book does not contain any text, explicit or implicit, that limits learning to a specific gender. It does include general statements pertaining to education, such as that "knowledge is light" and "those who know are not the same as those who do not know." Indeed, the prophet Muhammad (c. AD 570–632), the founder of the faith, emphasized the importance of education, explicitly stating, "The pursuit of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, man and woman."

Next, let us look at Muslim-majority countries. The current prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, is a Muslim woman and was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* in 2018. Afghanistan's neighbor, Pakistan, had an Oxford University-educated woman, the late Benazir Bhutto,



THE UNIVERSITY OF AL-QARAWIYYIN is the oldest continually operating educational institution in the world. Fatima al-Fihri, a Muslim woman, established the school in Fès, Morocco, in the ninth century AD. (Photo by waleedyousef/Shutterstock.com.)

as its prime minister in 1988–90 and again in 1993–96. Save for Afghanistan, no other country—and therefore no Muslim-majority country—limits education to a particular gender.

Women have also long been welcomed into learning at the institutional level. Al-Azhar University, a well-known center of Islamic learning in Cairo, Egypt, is open to women. The oldest continually operating university in the world—the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fès, Morocco—was established by a Muslim woman, Fatima al-Fihri, in AD 859.² Al-Fihri used her inheritance from her father to establish the venerable educational institution, when many people would have used such newfound wealth for themselves. Among the school's alumni are the philosopher Maimonides (1135–1204), the historian Ibn-Khaldūn (1332–1406), the philosopher Averroës (1126–1198), and Pope Sylvester II (c. 940–1003).

All societies, especially those in developing countries, must use their resources to advance and improve the standard of living of their citizens, and education is the best way to do that. Women are roughly

half the population. Excluding them from the educational system means ending up with half a society. An apt reminder is found in lines written by the Egyptian and Muslim poet Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (c. AD 1871–1932): "The mother is a school / If established well, she establishes a noble people." That is consistent with the well-known expression, "If you educate a man, you educate one person. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation."

In time, it will become clear that placing barriers on education is a futile effort. But in the meantime, what can be done to help young girls in Afghanistan and elsewhere to gain an education? One option is to use modern technology. Young people worldwide are adept at using the internet and social media, and those channels can be used to provide them with free educational resources.

Indeed, the BBC has been running an educational program for girls in Afghanistan via the web, TV, and radio. The program is called *Dars*, which means "lesson" in Dari and Pashto, the country's official languages. It has been used in "secret schools" and was commended

as a “learning lifeline” by the United Nations.³ The member societies of the American Institute of Physics should consider working with organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF to create additional learning lifelines.

Such initiatives would be consistent with 21st-century thinking surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion—at large and in the sciences in particular. They would require concerted effort and patience, but they would be bound to succeed in the end. You cannot underestimate the resolve of younger generations to aspire to a better life for themselves and their families. In time, it will become clear to those who place barriers on education that their efforts are futile.

References

1. UNESCO, “Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!” (18 January 2023).
2. C. Griffiths, T. Buttery, “The world’s oldest centre of learning,” BBC (19 March 2018).
3. M. Aman, “BBC show is a ‘lifeline’ for Afghan girls, UN says,” BBC (14 October 2023).

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The insufficient word in PHYSICS TODAY’s first issue

When PHYSICS TODAY debuted in May 1948, its first editor, David Katcher, wrote the following in an editorial introducing the magazine.

PHYSICS TODAY is for the physicist, to inform him in comfortable, everyday language, of what goes on and why and who goes where. But it is also for the chemist, the biologist, and the engineer, to tell them of the science towards which they are driven by so many of their investigations; it is for the student, the teacher, the lawyer, the doctor, and all who are curious about physics; it is for administrative officials who deal with research; it is for editors and writers whose profession puts them midway between what is done and how it should be reported; it is for you, whatever reason brought you to this page.

In his engaging article “PHYSICS TODAY turns 75,” (PHYSICS TODAY, May 2023, page 42) current editor-in-chief Richard Fitzgerald comments on that editorial, saying, “One part of Katcher’s description above is notably out of date, though. PHYSICS TODAY has evolved into more than a magazine and can be found well beyond the printed page. We have a website, email newsletters, social media, and webinars, and we’ll continue to seek out and engage with our audiences wherever they may be.”

I feel that Fitzgerald’s feature missed an important opportunity to discuss an even glaringly more out-of-date part of Katcher’s description, in the first sentence: the use of the pronoun “him”—which makes the introduction to both the magazine, and thus Fitzgerald’s article, explicitly gendered.

Given, as Fitzgerald puts it, that PHYSICS TODAY strives “to be a reminder of our



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The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) anticipates awarding two new Precision Measurement Grants that would start on 2024 October 1, contingent on the availability of funding. Each award would be up to \$50,000 per year with a performance period of up to three years. The awards will support research in the field of fundamental measurement or the determination of fundamental physical constants. The official Notice of Funding Opportunity, which includes the eligibility requirements, will be posted at www.Grants.gov.

Application deadline is tentatively **2024 February 2**
For details/unofficial updates see: physics.nist.gov/pmg.

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