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Rendezvous with Sultana N Nahar

Editor's note: It was an exclusive opportunity to reach out and interview *Prof. Sultana N. Nahar*, whom I have known personally and professionally. Hailing from the South Asian country Bangladesh, she is currently affiliated with Astronomy Department at *The Ohio State University*, Columbus, USA. She also serves as an Adjunct Professor of Physics at *Aligarh Muslim University*, India and *Cairo University*, Egypt. She is the Co-Director of *Obama Singh Indo-US STEM Education and Research* program. Her research work explores Atomic processes in astrophysical plasmas. She has co-authored the textbook "*Atomic Astrophysics and Spectroscopy*" (Cambridge University press 2011). Among various accolades to her name are *Fellow of American Physical Society (APS)*, *John Wheatley* award of APS, *Woman Physicist of the Month* of APS. Read her responses below for advice, inspiration and challenges as a South Asian Muslim woman in STEM.



How has your background and identity as a South Asian Muslim woman influenced your career life?

I was polite and talked only when it was needed, usual for a studious student in Bangladesh. I was helpful for any need and therefore was loved by classmates, families and teachers. However, that nature needed to be changed to more outspoken for a career in the US and I took long time to achieve it. Regardless of the achievements, my upbringing as a South Asian Muslim woman has helped me to understand and appreciate the human sides of others and be respectful to the diversity.

Please share the motivation and role models behind your decision to pursue higher education and research.

I did not have any role model to follow. I was naturally attracted to knowledge and fascinated by science. At my Class II final exam, I noted that my parents were very pleased when I got 100% marks in my subjects and stood first. They did not show the happiness when I stood second in the Third grade. I felt it would be my treat to make them happy by doing well in school. Since then I felt the urge to make effort for the perfect score. I wanted to get the highest degree because it would make me feel accomplished. I became interested in medicine in school so I could treat patients from sufferings. My parents were supportive of my decision and did not want to interrupt my interest through marriage. Study of physics changed my perspective and piqued my interest to reach to the unknown

universe. Being part of the astronomical research leads to enhancing our knowledge of God's creations for benefits of human kind and protection from outer space calamity. I realized research would be challenging, but I wanted to face it. I learnt in school that I would get one credit if I try to achieve a goal but two credits if I succeed.

In your opinion, what strategies and endeavors can help to represent, advocate and empower women in STEM?

As women in STEM, we should keep in mind that we are half of the intellectual power of total population and so should contribute accordingly. Family is also important for a woman as it is the path for continuation of generation. It requires significant amount of time. As the founder of the *International Society of Muslim Women in Science (ISMWS)*, I would advise the following practice:

- 1) Detach yourself for a few hours within 24 hours from daily chores and devote brain for intellectual nourishment and scientific productivity.
- 2) State the need for the time for activities and sharing responsibilities to family members with firm yet modest manner.
- 3) Be patient, forgiving but remain firm to objectives. Avoid apologies.
- 4) Believe that failures are not the cause to give up. Remember that while success brings two points, effort even with no success will bring one merit for you.
- 5) Even if you have to give up partial benefits, such as salary, make best effort to remain in science.
- 6) Believe that the more we use our brain, the more beautiful we become.
- 7) Regardless of achievements, we must keep our dreams alive for ourselves.

Can you highlight your STEM initiatives and outreach programs for minorities, in particular women?

I got involved in outreach activities and promotion of research and education since 1995 because I felt the need that the third world and Arab countries should be part of the advances along with the developed countries. Brain is a special entity and can be extremely powerful with training in any location and environment. I know our inherent nature to be pleased and motivated through recognition. Hence, I have been establishing recognition programs for research and education in Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Palestine and USA.

The fraction of the total of Muslim women in STEM is much smaller than other race or group but bigger than typically assumed. Although highly capable, they are least connected to research in advanced countries, and carry out research with very limited resources. The purpose of founding *ISMWS* in 2010 was to connect, support, promote, and help Muslim women in science, provide scopes of various research and career opportunities, and encourage younger female Muslims to pursue STEM education and research. We have a website that provides various information on the scopes and newsletter that reports successes and achievements of the members that inspires others. We have been giving recognition at International Women's Day celebration. *ISMWS* has now about 300 enthusiastic members from 31 countries.

Based on personal experiences, what is your advice for young women aspiring to excel in scientific research?

Young women are the torch bearers of successes for the continuation of contributions to scientific advances and its enhancement. I would ask them to accept this job as their duty and follow the points I mentioned above. I could ask them to aim like me to contribute, as encouraged by Islam, through: i) raising good children, ii) new knowledge from research, iii) helping the society by education, prosperity and unity.

Interview by *Dr. Nida Rehmani*: Content editor



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