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Ohio State professor connects cultures to promote science

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Ohio State professor Sultana Nahar works to improve the quality of education in developing countries, like her home country of Bangladesh, by connecting researchers to these underdeveloped countries. Credit: Courtesy of Sultana Nahar

Ohio State professor Sultana Nahar has given more than astrophysics research to the scientific community, as she's worked to bring higher education to women and children in underdeveloped countries.

For the last 20 years, Nahar has worked in developing countries, most notably her home country of Bangladesh. Nahar looked to improve the quality of education at poor schools, to connect researchers in underserved areas with the international community and to provide an open forum for Muslim women in science.

"If we come together, we can make advances faster, much faster, than in isolation," Nahar said.

Nahar started her outreach efforts after she attended numerous scientific conferences and did not see other Bangladeshi scientists. Recognizing the lack of resources and support for Bangladeshi researchers, Nahar started programs to encourage the international involvement of scientists in developing countries. Since, she has connected people from 22 countries to the American Physical Society who otherwise may not have had access.

In addition, she has created programs to link emerging research professionals in developing countries with universities in the United States, including OSU.

Sabiha Parveen, a graduate student in chemistry is involved in one such program and hopes to eventually become a faculty member at Aligarh Muslim University in India, where she is currently enrolled.

"I am feeling very lucky to be part of this program, and it is all possible because of (Nahar)," Parveen said. "She has become the role-model lady for me."

While enabling emerging researchers and scientists is an important aspect of Nahar's work, she also focuses on primary education by working to provide textbooks and technology to underserved primary and secondary schools in countries and territories such as Bangladesh, Egypt, India and Palestine.

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At the same time, to inspire higher quality teaching, Nahar has created research and teaching awards, so students can nominate their most influential teachers.

"What kind of people can change the whole education system?" Nahar asked. "They are the teachers."

Nahar found this strategy particularly successful in improving school enrollment and graduation rates.

"Sometimes it seems like people don't care about recognition," Nahar said, "But somehow it is 100 percent sure it brings motivation and encouragement."

In addition to these initiatives, Nahar also founded the International Society of Muslim Women in Science to give Muslim women from developing countries exposure to Western science. The group encourages women to pursue a career in science despite outside pressure.

"We have a brain like any man and we are supposed to learn," she said. "God has given you a brain. It doesn't mean you have to waste your dream to do other things."

Ultimately, Nahar said she hopes to provide the people and children of developing countries with opportunities to pursue in-depth scientific research they otherwise might not experience.

Whether that means inspiring small children to dream about flying spaceships or enabling already established professors to make meaningful contributions to the field of science, Nahar said she constantly works to achieve this goal.

"God has created this whole universe," Nahar said. "We have to know it. If you know it, now you can do something."



The Engaged Scholars logo accompanies stories that feature and examine research and teaching partnerships formed between the Ohio State University and the community (local, state, national and global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources. These stories spring from a partnership with OSU's Office of Outreach and Engagement. The Lantern retains sole editorial control over the selection, writing and editing of these stories.

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