

The Enigma of Women's Education in the Middle East

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW in *Forbes*, Mahnaz Afkhami, president of Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace was asked about the current state of women's education in her native Iran. "In many Muslim-majority countries, women are extraordinarily active and involved in education. More than 60 percent of university students in Iran are women, and you have skilled women working, many in leadership positions. But you also have really strong conservative forces inside and outside government and a set of family laws that are archaic," she said.

Our cover story brings us the first in an occasional series of articles on the state of women's education, especially higher education, in different regions of the world. This feature paints a picture of the Middle East where much progress is being made for

women's education in several nations. But the picture can be complex and in some cases ambiguous. Iran, for example has a long history of higher education availability for women that might be considered an exemplar for the region. But, as Afkhami points out, despite the high level of women's academic achievement in Iran, the nation continues to limit opportunities for its daughters.

The recent upheavals after the disputed election this spring showed that many women there are looking for ways to liberalize the regime. They have been seen prominently in many of the street demonstrations and their high level of education is undoubtedly contributing to their eminence in the reform movement. Among those making significant statements about the illegitimacy of methods employed by the Iranian government to suppress the protests has been Nobel Lau-

reate Shirin Ebadi. In August, Ebadi (who addressed a NAFSA conference in 2006) was put on trial (in absentia) along with more than 100 other civil rights and opposition leaders allegedly conspiring with "Western powers" against the Iranian regime.

In other Middle Eastern countries there has been clear progress, but at varying rates and with different goals and results. One clear theme, however, is the key role that women's education can play in the overall development of the region. As Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad, president of Qatar University notes in our cover story, "Experience around the world also has shown that educating a woman benefits her whole family, so that the fruits of her success are shared among a broader circle... Our society is in need of participation of every single member. We cannot afford to underutilize our scarce human resources." **IE**

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