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Marshak Lectureship Talk: Women in Physics in Egypt and the Arab World

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Until the end of the 19th Century Science was not classified into different disciplines. The first woman named in the history of science was Merit Ptah (2700 BC) in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. In the new Egypt the first girl's school started in Cairo in 1873 and the first University in 1908. Only a few girls attended the University at that time, mainly studying the humanities. The first Egyptian woman physicist graduated in 1940 and received her PhD in nuclear physics in the USA. Nowadays the number of women in physics is increasing in all branches of physics, some of them are senior managers and others have been decorated with various prizes. In this talk some statistics will be given to show the percentage of women in physics in relation to other fields of science in Egypt. In Saudi Arabia the first girls' school started in 1964 and the first college for women, which was a section of King Abdul-Aziz University (where education is not mixed), started in 1975. I was the founder of the Physics Department of this women's section. Egyptians have played significant roles in teaching schoolchildren and university students of both sexes in all the Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Kuwait, Yemen, the Gulf States, Libya, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. But with respect to Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, our role was limited, since classes are taught in French. Arab women living in the countries located east of Egypt still have many difficulties facing them, needing to overcome many technical, academic, and social problems, while women in the countries located west of Egypt have fewer problems. There were many problems in the early days of education in Egypt but the women of Egypt worked hard to gain the same rights as men and were able to pave the way for all Arab women. I myself met many difficulties in my early days. This talk will also describe the impact of the regional conference on Women in Physics in Africa and Middle East, which was held in Cairo in 2007.