

Dr. Nasrine Kamel Ghaddar The First Arab Woman to Hold a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from M.I.T.

She wears a veil on her head and a serene smile on her face. She is the first Lebanese woman to hold a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering (Thermal and Fluid Sciences-Computational Fluid Dynamics and Heat Transfer) from M.I.T. She is the fourth woman to graduate in this field in the history of MIT.

Dr. Nasrine Kamel Ghaddar is a Lebanese and a former resident of Kuwait. She is married and has one child. She completed her Bachelor's of Science in Mechanical Engineering at Kuwait University (K.U.) in 1980 and completed her graduate and post-graduate studies at M.I.T., Massachusetts institute of Technology, in 1985. Upon her graduation, she returned to Kuwait and joined the faculty of Mechanical Engineering at Kuwait University. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in the summer of 1990, Dr. Ghaddar returned to Lebanon and plans to conduct research and teach at the American University of Beirut (A.U.B.).

An outstanding student and dynamic scholar, she received a number of honors and awards from K.U. and M.I.T. She is a member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineering (ASME) and the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA). At K.U., she was the editor of the Mechanical Engineering Newsletter and held administrative duties in cultural and scientific organizations. Not to mention that Dr. Ghaddar has a significant number of journal and conference publications.

She came to our Institute to inquire about children's books for her son. Hence, we grabbed the opportunity to ask her a few questions about herself and her experiences as a female scholar at M.I.T. and as a highly educated woman in the traditional societies of the Middle East.

She was frank and relaxed. The veil on her head did not veil her modesty, openness and progressive character, if I dare say so.



Dr. Ghaddar and Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr, director of IwsAw (left to right).

1. Why Mechanical Engineering? and why a Ph.D.?

First, I am interested in this field. After finishing my Bachelor's degree at K.U., I had some field training which inspired me to nurture my interest and knowledge. A Ph.D. came also as a challenge for me as a female because women worldwide tend to turn away from higher education in this domain.

2. What was your parents' attitude towards your decision to go for a Ph.D.?

My father did not encourage me at first. But when I received a scholarship from the «Kuwait Foundation for Advancement of Science», he was happy to see me go for it. My father is a teacher and education is his mission in life. Therefore, when the financial means for my education were secured, he supported me. He feels that a woman should be independent and progressive. My mother also felt that I should not turn down an opportunity like this.

3. Did you encounter the traditional attitude that a Ph.D. and consequently, intellectual advancement for a woman would scare men away and get in the way of marriage?

What I encountered was «Why invest so much money on women if they abandon everything after marriage?».

I strongly disagree with this theory for a very simple and non-sexist reason. I believe that if a woman invests so much time, effort and money to get a degree, it becomes virtually impossible for her to sit idle at home. Her specialization becomes a part of her and of her life.

On the other hand, the idea that education scares men away is more prevalent in the Middle East than in the West. Over here, men have difficulties imagining a woman in engineering. Consequently, they resist accepting her and supporting her as a colleague. Whereas, I was always treated as one of the guys at M.I.T. although I was the only female in one of my lab classes. Sex was of no concern. What mattered was the work itself. The atmosphere was void of sex-roles and stereotypes and based solely on competition and achievement.

4. Well! did your Ph.D. cause any problems with men as far as your marriage was concerned?

No, I got married after finishing my graduate work and particularly during the last year of my Ph.D. I met my husband in Kuwait on one of my vacations. My husband is a Mechanical Engineer too.

5. Are there any problems or competition there?

No, my husband works in the field, i.e. applied engineering, whereas, I chose research and academics. Our profession compliments and strengthens our relationship rather than exert pressure on it. I am a source of reference for him when it comes to solving field problems and he provides me with ideas to research and explore.

As far as domestic matters are concerned, he is very helpful. We share household duties and he even takes time off from work to stay with our son when I am busy at work. ●