

## V. INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES

## MY BEST FRIEND

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The importance of women in the process we call Science is numerous, and remarks advocating their participation have been put forward by some women a long time ago (Londa Schiebinger's talk on "Women in the Origins of Modern Science"). I want to speak out for the women who at this moment are being denied their right to learn, and for those who have the talent and ability to make good scientific contributions but never got beyond high school. This situation is very common in poor countries.

I have chosen as an example a woman who lives in México, whom I know very well. We have been very close friends for a long time, indeed we were the same person for a period of nine months. But, regretfully, I don't recall very much about that time. This woman is my best friend, I owe her everything that I am, and it is for her that I dare to write this.

In a synoptic way, I will describe her life. I am sure that at this very moment there is a woman living a similar life. At the age of eight, instead of going to school, she went to work in a local restaurant as a cook's assistant. She had to do this in order to help her father (who was a farmer) support her two younger brothers. Some years later, when things got a little more stable, she asked her stepmother for permission to attend elementary school. This is what she was told: "No, it is not useful for women to go to school, they only go there to learn how to write letters to their boyfriends." Therefore, she remained at home.

At the age of 16 years, she either had to become engaged to be married, or leave the farm and go to the nearest town to seek better opportunities. She met a family of merchants who hired her as a housekeeper and took her under their protection. She was always very eager to learn how to read and write. While assisting in the merchant's grocery store she learnt the rudiments of writing and arithmetics in a few weeks.

A few years later she moved to Mexico City. She worked in the line of a textile factory sewing buttons. She got married at the age of 22, and by then it was clear in her mind that education was the way to liberate people from poverty. Therefore, she and her husband devoted great efforts to sending their children to school. Fortunately, their efforts have been assisted by an initiative boosted by the Mexican government to modernize the country.

At this moment, the participation of women and minority groups (I think about the Native Indians in America as an example) is very weak or absent at the higher levels of education. I am not a sociologist, nor can I offer you statistics on the situation. In my very limited and biased view, the very origin of the problem is within the complex socioeconomic interrelationships of our society. The scientific community is a very active group and is well-known as a promoter of change. Therefore, any effort that can be dedicated to enhance the participation of women or any under-represented group in Astronomy will have a lot of beneficial consequences. The time is right for a change and this meeting is a good start.

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