

Guest column: Education opens doors to gender equality

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Each March we celebrate Women's History Month and International Women's Day, a time when we recognize the many accomplishments and impact of women throughout history. While our nation acknowledges the women who shaped history, fought for civil rights, served as leaders and made great discoveries, often the less famous but no less impactful women are forgotten.

Women have shaped history through their everyday labors in the home, in shops, in classrooms, hospitals, labs, community agencies, in government and factories. Yet sadly many made groundbreaking history without ever being acknowledged.

While we celebrate women in history this month, we must not forget the struggles women faced throughout history from the right to vote, to accessing education and striving to achieve equality — struggles that continue to this day. As an educator, it pains me to see how many women were, and still are, prevented from achieving their hopes and dreams by a society and culture that denies them access to education.

I can't help thinking of my mother, a strong and intelligent woman, who wanted to be a nurse. However, my grandfather would not allow her to attend nursing school because "it would have been a waste of money because she would wind up getting married and not finish her studies."

I can't help wondering how her life would have been different if she had been allowed to pursue her dreams. She was an immigrant who left everything behind to have a better life for her family. She raised me to value education and worked as a teacher's aide, custodian, and caregiver to ensure I would be able to pursue my education. Yet, it was her story of how she was not allowed

to pursue her hopes and dreams of an education that has stuck with me all these years. Her story was from a different time and culture, but it is still a common story for many women in our society.

Gender discrimination and bias are two of the reasons that equity in education is so important. It is impossible to achieve equality if we cannot provide access to education. Quinsigamond Community College, along with other community colleges, was based on the premise of equitable access to higher education. Over the years, the college has been providing access to higher education for women who might otherwise have been prevented from pursuing their hopes and dreams of achieving a better future through education.

Rather than focus on the historical figures and those famous women who succeeded, often against the odds, I want to focus on the women who are attending QCC. In fact, over 60% of current students at QCC are women. They are first-generation college students, immigrants, single mothers, parents, nontraditional students, English as a second language learners, who are making a positive difference in their lives and the lives of others. One such student, Rose, immediately comes to mind.

Rose, like my mother, is an immigrant who faced obstacles in achieving her dream of being a cardiologist. Yet a language barrier and family challenges did not deter her. Through hard work, dedication, self-belief and a persevering spirit, she pushed through her challenges, attended Worcester Technical High School and eventually took early college classes in biology at QCC.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and she encountered unprecedented obstacles, her commitment to her education never wavered. She continued to chip away at her associate degree in biology, balancing her academic pursuits with a work-study position at QCC's athletic center. Today, Rose is attending Worcester State University majoring in biology, pre-med and hopes to have both an associate and bachelor's degree in another year.

Another student who has made an indelible impact on our college community is Fatin.

Fatin came to the U.S. as an immigrant with her young family, driven out of her country to escape the kidnappings and killings of educated people in her homeland. She already had an engineering degree; however, to stay in the U.S. she had to attend school and search for a job, a challenge since English was not her spoken language.

Like Rose, she turned to QCC and began taking English as a second language classes. Soon Fatin was taking classes in biomedical engineering. Along with her course load and caring for her family, she held down a work-study job at the college's athletic center, volunteered as a translator in the admissions office, became an active member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and a member of the new Women in STEM student organization, acted as an ambassador for other refugees and was even a player on QCC's first women's soccer team.

Fatin went on to earn her associate degree in biomedical engineering, graduating with top honors before transferring to WPI, where she earned her bachelor's degree, then went on to earn her master's from Northcentral University. I am honored to say that today she has come full circle and is a full-time assistant professor of engineering technology at QCC. She is continuing to pave the way for other women in the STEM field and is an inspiration to her students and her peers.

These are just two of the thousands of women who have attended QCC. These women have persevered through unimaginable barriers, breaking glass ceilings and changing our world.

Colleges like QCC must continue to provide access to a quality college education that will further empower women to shape their own destiny and our future. Through programs and support such as MassReconnect, which offers free community college for eligible Massachusetts residents 25 and

older to parenting support services and resources, we must do everything we can to achieve gender equality now, through access to education.

As Rose so eloquently wrote, "My narrative is not just a testament to academic achievement, it's a compelling illustration of breaking free from societal and familial expectations to forge one's own path. It's a narrative of transformation, resilience and the indomitable spirit of chasing one's dreams against all odds. As I continue on my path to becoming a cardiologist, my journey serves as an inspirational reminder that with determination and self-belief, any dream is within reach."

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