



MATHS: A LIFE-LONG LOVE

Gender Equity & Industry Engagement

RMIT's Associate Dean of Mathematical Sciences, Professor Asha Rao talks about her career, industry collaboration and fostering a new generation of female mathematicians.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN MATHS?

Maths was always easy. As my mum tells me, I had to give an entrance exam for grade 1 (this is common in India), in which I scored 98/100 in maths (and 2/100 for spelling). My parents encouraged me to study, with my mum being the main force – she always insisted that I did the best I could, and that usually meant I had to be near the top in class. Because it was easy, maths was not really a challenge. I did learn early that I needed to put effort into it, else I could not ace it. However, this was never a problem – I preferred doing maths to anything else, except drawing.

WHO WERE YOUR ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS AS A WOMAN ENTERING THE MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES?

I did my master's degree at Bombay University (now Mumbai University). The faculty in the Department of Mathematics at Bombay University had a big gender imbalance – there were almost twice as many female lecturers as male! This meant that I did not find it strange to be female entering mathematical sciences. I just thought it was natural to be female and doing maths.

HOW IS ACCESS TO FEMALE MATHEMATICS ROLE MODELS FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN ENTERING THE DISCIPLINE?

It is very important for female mathematicians to mentor and be role models for not only girls and women entering the discipline, but also males. By being role models for all genders, we will help girls and women to progress better. Strong female role models help boys and men to recognise that their sisters and daughters, and female colleagues and students can be the same. Throughout my career, I have endeavoured to show all students what a strong female role model looks like.

WHAT CHANGES HAVE YOU SEEN SINCE YOU BEGAN YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER?

I have been in academia for almost 25 years and I have seen sporadic changes over that period. Often there are positive bias steps taken, but then there is lassitude within the discipline, and things are allowed to slide. It is almost as if, every generation of women has to

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STEM INTEREST**
