Fostering Women’s Empowerment in the U.S. and Southeast Asia

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Since 1983, the Mansfield Center of the University of Montana has served our state by fostering an understanding of Asia, ethics, and public affairs. A key link in achieving our mission is implementing professional exchange programs between Montana and the world. Tonight I’d like to tell you about the latest initiative we’ve put together to benefit Montana: the Women’s Empowerment Project.

Gender equality is not only a basic human right, but it also has tremendous socio-economic impact. Empowering women helps fuel economies, spurring productivity and growth. But gender inequities remain deeply entrenched in every society. Women are more likely than men to be poor and illiterate. Women remain under-represented in political and economic decision-making processes. Montana ranks among the bottom of all states for both per capita income and wages. Not only that, but Montana ranks among the bottom nationally for gender equity in wages. Poverty and a lack of education leading to gainful employment opportunities too often prevent women in the state from attaining economic self-sufficiency.

As important as these statistics on economic security is the reality of personal safety and security. The issue of women’s empowerment and sexual assault has become front page news here at home. Local institutions are taking greater action to support women, encouraging women to speak up about their experiences and to build a culture where it is unacceptable for men to stand by silently when women are threatened.
Obviously, these issues are not confined to Montana. The 2010 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program found that the Asia-Pacific region as a whole ranks near the worst in the world on basic issues such as protecting women from violence and upholding their rights to property, as well as education, employment, political participation, and health.

If Montana shares at least some of these problems, the state has also developed a number of organizations that work to address them. As a result, the U.S. Department of State has given the Mansfield Center a $400,000 grant to implement an exchange program between women in Montana and women in Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos in the area of women’s empowerment. The goal of the program is to teach emerging leaders how to engage in collaborative action to address women’s concerns that have global repercussions. Programs like this Women’s Empowerment Project are critical to assist women to develop their economic power and political voice.

The project brings 20 women from Southeast Asia to Montana for month-long visits to engage in leadership and technology training and to pursue fellowships with partner organizations. I recently returned from a visit to southeast Asia where I sat on selection panels with our local partners and U.S. Embassy officials. We interviewed exceptional women from among nearly 200 applicants to the program. To give you a sense of the women who will be coming to Montana, in Thailand, I met Sutada, the coordinator of a network of 80 women’s organizations and an advisor to the prime minister. In Cambodia, there was Soren, who provides legal support to women and children in a judicial system hostile to domestic violence charges. In Vietnam, Anh creates opportunities for disabled women and girls in a system that traditionally discounts those with disabilities. And in Laos, I met Vatthanathavone, who helps villagers fight to protect their ancestral lands in the face of those who would flood their lands
and move them far from home. It is incredible women like these who will be visiting Montana in the coming year.

In return, 20 women from Montana will travel to Southeast Asia to share their professional expertise; broaden their perspectives on women’s issues; and learn about new cultures and societies. Many of our Montana participants will come from partners like the Salish and Kootenai Tribes; WORD, the YWCA, the Montana Community Development Corporation, and the State Department of Health and Human Services. However, if you are a woman working in a relevant field who is interested in partnering with us, we welcome hearing from you. We will also feature the participants at this year’s Mansfield Conference on women’s issues on the campus of The University of Montana the last week of April. For more information, please see our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield, or call me at 243-2713.

Beyond the personal growth experienced by each participant, the program promotes mutual understanding and lasting partnerships between organizations in Montana and in Southeast Asia. And finally, much of this federal grant funding will be invested right here in our local economies. The Mansfield Center is honored to bring these opportunities to the state of Montana.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, I’m Deena Mansour. Thank you for listening.