



WOMEN'S RIGHTS, WOMEN'S POWER

By Alicia Bessette

Ground-level change

When does respect for another culture's practices cross the line into condoning human rights abuses?

Students, professors and other experts gathered at Bryn Mawr's Wyndham Alumnae House March 27 through 28 to address that question and many others during the interdisciplinary conference, "Cultural Relativism versus Human Rights: Women's Global Issues."

In her welcoming remarks, conference organizer Leslie Rescorla, director of the Katharine Houghton Hepburn Center and professor of psychology, said that while in recent decades we've seen an increasing embrace of cultural relativism in the form of multiculturalism, which eschews condemning practices in other cultures, we've also seen widespread acceptance of universal human rights. A clear tension exists between cultural relativism and human rights, she said, and the conflict is particularly striking when it comes to the rights of women.

"Most people would agree that sexual trafficking and child prostitution are among the most egregious violations of universal human rights," she said. "Many would place female genital mutilation in this same category, yet this practice is widely supported in many cultures. Whether women should

continued on page 28



INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS OUTLINE NEED FOR CHANGE

By Alicia Bessette



Femicide, sexism, and military occupation are among enormous obstacles facing girls and young women around the world. Five international students discussed these obstacles—and how to conquer them—during a panel discussion entitled "Adolescent Girls: A Global Snapshot." Katharine Houghton Hepburn Fellow Maya Ajmera '89, founder and president of The Global Fund for Children, introduced the panelists and asked them to respond to several questions about their own experiences. "Women's issues start when they are girls," noted Ajmera, who talked about her efforts to learn the stories of her female relatives and the role those played in balancing what was expected of her by her family and by Bryn Mawr.

Ajmera related how after completing a master of public policy degree from Duke University, she started GFC with just \$25,000 in seed capital.



From left: Hind Eideh '09, Deborah Ahenkorah '10, and Maya Ajmera '89. Photos by Linda Johnson



"I wanted to make small, targeted capital investments in innovative grassroots organizations serving children and youth," she said. "Small amounts of money targeted to extraordinary innovators can do remarkable things." The first grant GFC gave benefitted informal train platform schools in India; the second benefitted adolescents in northern Thailand living with the AIDS crisis. Since 1994, GFC has disbursed nearly \$15 million in 69 countries to over 350 non-governmental organizations over the world, serving more than one million children.

Education

Deborah Ahenkorah '10, who had a Hepburn internship this summer with Ajmera at the GFR, noted that despite a national campaign to educate young girls in her native Ghana, a notable disparity exists between rural and urban schools. The disparity became real to Ahenkorah when she was promoting the Baobab Prize (<http://baobabprize.googlepages.com>), which she recently established with funding from Bryn Mawr to encourage the writing of African literature for young readers. She visited a rural library, where an 8-year-old girl stumbled over basic words in an early-reader book. "Another girl her age going to school in the city, getting the kind of education I got, would probably have been able to read it," said Ahenkorah, who is from the capital, Accra. "The reading levels are not comparable." In her summer internship at The Global Fund for Children, Ahenkorah pursued her

interest in children's literature by assisting in GFC's book publishing department, which produces photo-illustrated children's books, showing the similarities of children throughout the world.

The first 10 years of junior Gabriela Andicoechea '09's life were during the last 10 years of a 36-year civil war in Guatemala. She remembers school often was cancelled or cut short during street violence. Andicoechea said that today, women frequently are victims of systematized violence in Guatemala, where more than 60 percent of women are illiterate, and femicide is a major national problem. Recently a large public university saw an increase in women applicants to their engineering program, she said, but many of those applicants were accosted, beaten, or raped, because engineering is seen as an inappropriate career for women.

Palestinian students must stop at military checkpoints on the way to and from school, according to Hind Eideh '09, who is from the West Bank. "In times of political instability, students are subjected to harassments at checkpoints, which often results in their not getting to class on time, or not at all," she said. "These factors affect everyone, but girls specifically, because of the traditional patriarchal nature of my society. If a girl had a chance of going to a better school in a further city, her parents would not send her because they'd be fearful of her safety."

continued on page 30



And in China, boys often are selected for advanced programs over girls who scored higher on entrance examinations, said Menghan Shen '10, from Guangzhou; teachers defend that trend, claiming they must maintain an equal gender ratio in schools.

Dating, marriage and sex

The panel shared their experiences dealing with cultural norms that surround dating, marriage and sex, and in some cases the shame associated with girls and women in relation to those topics.

From Lahore, Annum Hussain '10 discussed the tendency of men in Pakistan to stare at women—"a terrible generalization, but it's so true," she said. "You are expected to take it, and just look down and be ashamed. The worse thing is that it's not just guys but girls who make you feel that you're doing something wrong when someone is looking at you with that kind of stare. You should never be made to feel that way. It's institutionalized sexism, which frustrates me so much."

Hussain also said that honor killings and gang rape put Pakistan in the global media limelight. "These are gruesome realities, but they have to be examined with Islam in the background," she said. "They don't have anything to do with any religion or a specific set of beliefs. This is bad people doing bad things, to put it very simply. It needs to be examined in a local context, in a way that you're not making a

set of people feel bad about a set of their beliefs. It's not something you can associate with religion."

Andicoechea explained machismo, under which "men are encouraged to have as many sexual conquests as they can, but women are supposed to be the opposite." The idea of women being the honor of the family plays a big role in Guatemalan society, she said. "If you walk to school and you're raped, you've ruined your family. It's your cross to bear, your burden. Women are consistently raped at home by their own husbands, because the belief is that if you're married, it's your duty. Your desire, your choice, your wish doesn't come into question."

In Ghana, Ahenkorah said, even well-educated women remain "very, very ignorant" about issues such as contraception, reproductive health, and sexual rights.

An active member of the Muslim Students Association, Eideh said Palestinian families become very involved when a woman chooses a husband. "While traditional marriages are still there, if you are to pick your own partner, your family has to be part of that process, and they have to approve it every step of the way. I live in a situation of occupation where there's an absence of a state or sovereignty, so your family becomes your only safety network, which is why it's important for them to have a say in that."

Hussain said that while her Western friends are doubtful about arranged marriages, she views them as progressive. "It's

continued on page 33

have the right to obtain an education, to choose their husbands, to control their child-bearing, to own property, to associate freely with others, to drive a car, and to choose how much of their bodies to cover in public are hotly contested issues in today's world. All of these issues reflect the tension between cultural relativism and human rights."

The conference reflected a broad, interdisciplinary approach. Organizers and speakers represented the social sciences and the humanities, and included academics from Bryn Mawr and elsewhere; professionals working in the broader world of international advocacy and social entrepreneurship; and Bryn Mawr students from five areas of the world.

Putting relationships at the center

Philosophy Professor Christine Koggel, who returned to Bryn Mawr this fall after serving two years as the Bower Carty Professor of Ethics and Public Affairs at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, kicked off the conference Friday night by critiquing the work of Harvard economist Amartya Sen. In Koggel's keynote address, "Human Rights through the Lens of Feminist Relational Theory," she argued that while Sen provides a contextual and integrated account of equality and human rights, he focuses too exclusively on individuals, and on enhancing individual agency. Instead, as globalization increasingly affects human needs, the focus

should be relationships—especially relationships of power at local, national, and global levels, and their intersections, Koggel said.

One of Sen's major contributions was to expand the information base that economists, political theorists, and policy-makers draw from, thereby expanding the definition of poverty. Up until the late 1990s, groups like the United Nations understood poverty only in terms of income and gaps in wealth. But Sen identified many other variables, such as ill health, un- and underemployment, lack of education, and social exclusion. He argued that context sensitivity helps us understand the kinds of inequalities that matter to people in specific contexts.

"People differ in respect to race, age, gender, disability, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives, and distribution of goods within the family," Koggel said. "Sen wants all this to receive attention in the making of public policy."

He also defends the fundamental value of public participation and debate as a way to shape policy.

Koggel takes these concepts a few steps further. "Relational theory starts with the idea that individuals exist in relationships and are shaped by them," she said. "More is needed than saying everybody should be in the debate. You need to ask what's stopping them from participating in the

continued on page 32



From left: Annum Hussain '10; Menghan Shen '10; Gabriela Andicoechea '09; Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities, in the gender and sexuality studies program and anthropology department, Gina Velasco; and Professor of Philosophy Christine Koggel. Photos by Linda Johnson.

debate. I think putting relationships rather than individuals at the center of the analysis helps us down that road.”

Koggel advocates examining relationships in their institutional settings to uncover, question and challenge the existing norms and structures of power on all levels. She calls for an analysis of how political, economic and social structures embed norms and institutions that stand in the way of removing inequalities for some. “We need to capture the effects of these relationships and structures on those who do not have the voice or power to contribute to those debates, discussions and decision-making about the policies that affect them,” she said.

Social movements and the work of local, national and international non-government organizations are proof that this type of analysis works, she said, giving the example of SATUNAMA, a local NGO in Yogyakarta that does work throughout Indonesia. In the summer of 2006 and with the support of a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Koggel and an anthropologist from the University of Lethbridge, observed and worked with staff at SATUNAMA as they carried out a range of projects centered on its mission of empowering people in the context in which they live their lives.

“SATUNAMA uses the discourse of human rights to get the funding they need, but they are changed by the implementations of policy by putting that human rights talk

into place,” she said. “It’s a much more dynamic kind of process on the ground level.

“I don’t view human rights as set in stone, never to be debated or expanded. We can have human rights and not feel threatened by the idea that context may have people implement those human rights differently, expanding on what that particular context presents them with.”

Women can ‘access their neighbor’

Ground-level change was also a theme in Saturday’s panel discussion on economic, political and legal issues. Manisha Desai, director of women’s studies at the University of Connecticut, said that because feminist movements around the world are self-reflexive, the focus of human rights discourse has evolved from state-centric to community-centric, and that focus allows communities to refashion human rights for their particular local situation.

She cited the work of the Women’s Economic Agenda Project, a California-based group that organizes the poor, low-income workers, and the unemployed. WEAP draws its inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign of 1968.

“Poor women of color in the U.S. have appropriated human rights discourse, reinserting the U.S. into a larger community of nations, and at same time bringing their histories of activism to bear on what I think are very

important issues that we need to think of as connected,” Desai said. “Globalization is very much affecting people here in the U.S., and we don’t make those linkages. But I think these recent changes in feminist human rights discourse are making those linkages, and that, to me, is very exciting.”

Desai supported the move away from a more legal, state-centric discourse, because “most women don’t have the ability to access the state, but they do have the ability to access their neighbor.”

Ohio State Professor of History and Women’s Studies Claire Robertson echoed that idea of women accessing their neighbors. In her talk, “Trade as a Basis for Women’s Rights,” she argued that African women’s emergence in the role of business and in achieving economic majority has been pivotal, contributing to their ability to become involved in political efforts.

In 2002 hundreds of Niger delta women, ranging in age from 30 to 90, took over an oil export terminal owned by Chevron Texaco. The women held workers hostage and demanded that the company invest in the surrounding community by offering jobs to their sons and development inputs—electricity, piped water, schools, and other amenities—to their villages.

More women occupied the pipeline flow stations. These women, said Robertson, were “armed with only civil

continued on page 34



From left: Psychologist Anna Balfour, Professor of Sociology Mary Osirim, University of Connecticut Chair of Women’s Studies Program, Manisha Desai. Photos by Linda Johnson.

not a marriage just to an individual, it’s a marriage to a family. I actually think that’s a beautiful concept. I love that my kids will grow up in a way that they get married into a family. It’s a structure. You’re living with grandparents, parents—you need to know if you’re compatible not just with a guy, but with his parents, and with his sisters, and everything. It teaches you a new way of living. It teaches you compatible living. You become diplomats of sorts.

“Just because some individuals foolishly force arranged marriages on two partners who aren’t willing,” Hussain added, “doesn’t mean the institution of arranged marriages is wrong. It’s worked for so many years. You have to look at things from a certain cultural viewpoint.”

An economist’s perspective

Both economics majors, Shen and Eideh took an economist’s perspective when an audience member asked, “What aspect of your own culture would you change?”

Eideh said that while more women than men graduate from universities in Palestine, women comprise only about 15 percent of the labor force, because of the common expectation that they stay home and raise children. “To me that’s potential skill and human capital that’s just waiting to be activated,” Eideh said. She conducted research during an internship at The Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) in Ramallah, thanks to a Bryn Mawr grant for international students.

Shen said that millions of Chinese work as unskilled laborers, entering the workforce at a young age. “For the past 10 years, everything we use is made in China,” she said. “Think about what the costs are behind that.”

In a subsequent interview, Shen explained that during a long bus trip to a village where she conducted her PEER Summer Camp (www.peerchina.org), she befriended teenagers working for Samsung in Guangdong. One 18-year-old had been working there since he was 11. “The kids really wanted to go home because they hadn’t been home for two years,” Shen said. “They only have seven days of vacation, and they would be wasting four days on the bus.”

Shen kept in touch with her new friends through instant messaging. “Sometimes I would message them and tell them how important reading and studying is. ‘But it gives me a headache’ was the reply. Last fall, they started to get less hours, and sometimes they are even off on Tuesdays or Thursdays. They were very confused about why their hours were cut, because no one bothered to explain any reasons to them. During the Chinese New Year, they could not buy train tickets to go home because they ran out so quickly. They also didn’t go home because they could save more money that way.

“Their lives really reflected the news we see about China,” she said. “To others, maybe they are just another person on the production line, but to me, knowing them as good friends, I deeply care about their living and development in this increasing inequality in China.” ❀

disobedience ethics and the most powerful curse women can place upon men, which they used: they threatened to bear their genitals to shame these men, their targets, by reminding the men that they too are sons, and bound to defend and obey those who give them life.”

Eventually Chevron Texaco signed an agreement intended to implement the women’s desired reforms and improvements.

Reportage of the event, Robertson said, didn’t address how the women organized themselves. “We get the impression that the actions which took place over a considerable area and involved more than 1,000 women were spontaneous, which is undoubtedly far from the case,” she said. “It seems that the women’s organizational skills were honed by trade skills and trading networks. An involvement in trade necessarily brings women to a situation of having full or at least partial economic rights, and those economic rights then form the basis for pushing for more political rights, which is what happened in these demonstrations. Women began with economic grievances, and found that remedying them necessitated an involvement in political protest. The more a woman is involved in trade, the more she must have economic rights.”

In Algeria, social networks of family and community are essential to women’s success, according to Deborah Harrold, a lecturer in Bryn Mawr’s political science department. “Most of the women who have spoken to me about women’s rights and work see their strategies as intense negotiation at the level of the family, the firm, and the university,” she said. “While they wish the state to open doors in a public space of safety, their effort to get through those doors is personally and familiarly managed.”

Harrold’s paper, “Algeria, Women, and Worlds of Work,” argued that the expansion of women’s rights before the Algerian civil war was not caused by the destruction of the Islamist regime, but by years of socialist discourse and a strong state.

“Political economists have been very harsh in their evaluation of Algerian socialism, but the expansion of the socialist discourse of women’s rights, the emphasis on women’s work as part of the socialist project of nation building, and the state’s proliferation of women’s organization, have considerable consequence in mobilizing and pushing and repeating and echoing these claims, and therefore changing expectations,” she said.

Women’s economic rights in Puno, Peru, were the subject of a presentation by Jenna Mulhall-Brereton ’96, whose master’s thesis focused on microfinance institutions in Latin America. She discussed her field research on Pro Mujer, a microfinance institution that offers not only loans, but human development services as well.

“Microfinance can be a particularly effective means to engender empowerment,” she said. “A microfinance program at its best is based on community participation and self-help rather than patriarchal top-down models. Also, it doesn’t present models for emulation, but gives individuals the tools

to make the changes that they can envision for themselves, that they think are best in their own lives.”

She emphasized that because Pro Mujer is based on a bottom-up model, “by definition, they don’t give quick fixes.” Women’s attitudes change over generations; as they grow to see themselves as capable of taking economic risks, they gradually change their communities and create new possibilities for their children.

The culture of ‘other’ and the culture of capitalism

Some feminists criticize microcredit institutions, Desai said, for disciplining women into becoming economic agents. “It’s not an accident that microcredit took off at the same time neoliberal policies were taking off all around in the 1990s...When we talk about culture, we tend to talk about the sensational issues, such as genital cutting in the case of Africa. But we never talk about the cultural practices of capitalism, which also produce a culture of exploiting women’s labor. Why is that *not* seen as culture?”

Rescorla said that while she doesn’t view the terms “cultural relativism” and “human rights” as inherently other-oriented, the terms are often used in other-oriented ways. “And I think that the point Manisha is making—that we have to look at our own culture; the degree to which our practices shape the way we look at the world; what we think is important, and how much we are exporting our values to the rest of the world, as opposed to saying, ‘what are the values of the rest of the world’—is a really important point to make,” Rescorla said.

Sexuality and reproductive rights

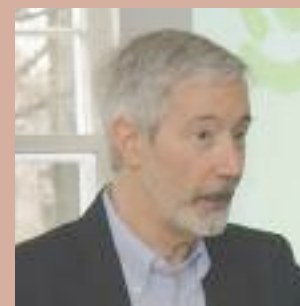
Other presentations concerned sexuality, gender and reproductive rights. William Ryerson, president of the Vermont-based Population Media Center, spoke about the power of mass media to change social norms on issues that affect the status of women, such as the use of family planning, avoidance of HIV infection, daughter education, gender-based violence, literacy, and related social and health issues.

Population Media works in many countries around the world to create research-based, value-driven television and radio serial dramas. Key characters address a given problematic issue, weigh the conflicting advice of other positive and negative characters, and evolve into role models for the audience.

Ryerson said the emotional content of melodrama is far more effective in creating social change than intellectual approaches, because emotional involvement leads to enhanced memory.

“We look at the policies of each country to create programs that promote those policies,” he said. Indigenous people are hired to work on every aspect of the serial drama, from the writing and acting to management.

Population Media is in talks with the Writers Guild of American and The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences



Counterclockwise from top: Jenna Mulhall-Brereton ’96, Professor of Psychology and Hepburn Center Director Leslie Rescorla, independent scholar Shiva Balagi, President of the Population Media Center William Ryerson, Associate Professor of Spanish and Coordinator of the Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies Lazaro Lima, and Lecturer in Political Science Deborah Herrold. Photos by Linda Johnson.

for a serial drama geared toward Americans about climate change and energy consumption, he said.

Gina Velasco, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities in the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program and the Anthropology Department, discussed the “exploited Filipino body”—representations of Filipino women who are sex workers, domestic helpers, and mail-order brides—in her talk about the traffic in women and the politics of solidarity in the Filipino diaspora. She analyzed Gabriela Network, a U.S. political organization that does solidarity work on Filipino women’s issues.

“The political work of GabNet is crucial to creating a transnational resistance to the gendered effects of capitalist globalization,” she said. “I argue that attention to differences in the experience of transnational workers is necessary to avoid a reductive feminist analysis.”

Lazaro Lima, Associate Professor of Spanish and Coordinator of Bryn Mawr’s Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies, gave a talk on biopower in Puerto Rico. He defined biopower as numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations. Included in the U.S.’s bio-political management of Puerto Rico were radiation trials conducted on political prisoners around 1930, and clandestine contraceptive pill trials undertaken without the consent of proletarian women in the 1950s.

Iranian visual artists

Independent scholar Shiva Balaghi, gave the luncheon keynote address, “Men of God, Women of Allah: Gender and Islam in Contemporary Iranian Art.” The title of her talk referred to a series of photographs produced in between 1993 and 1996 by artist Shirin Neshat, called *Women of Allah*.

“The struggle to define oneself becomes in no small part the struggle over representation,” Balaghi said. “Iran’s visual artists (both in Iran and in its diasporas) engaged in a contest over the power of representation, which is deeply gendered in its nature...In their work the sea of black that seems to engulf Iranians gives way to vivid hues and a brave determination to define oneself.”

Balaghi is vice president of the American Institute of Iranian Studies and is completing a book about modern Iranian cultural history.

In addition to Rescorla, Lima, and Velasco, conference organizers included Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of International Studies Mary Osirim, and Chair and Eunice M. Schenck 1907 Professor of French Penny Armstrong. Conference sponsors were the Katharine Houghton Hepburn Center; the Center for International Studies; the Center for Social Science; the Multicultural Center; the social justice pilot program; Africana studies; gender and sexuality studies; and the departments of anthropology, economics, political science, psychology and sociology. ❀