

Women of the Mountains: An International Conference



In honor of International Women's Day, an international conference entitled "Women of the Mountains" was held on 8–9 March 2007 in Orem, Utah, USA. This symposium, organized jointly by Utah Valley State College and the Kyrgyz National Centre for Development of Mountain Regions, brought together 110 participants from 20 countries. Mountain women, researchers, grassroots NGOs, and representatives of IGOs discussed the situation of mountain women around the world—focusing on 6 core topics: culture, health, education, economic issues, human exploitation, and leadership.

As expressed by the conference organizers, "the intended outcome of the program is to raise awareness and mobilize support from institutions within the United States mountain states and global mountain entities to assist in the sustainable development of the mountain communities of the world, particularly as it applies to women and children." This ambition builds on existing programs which have forged strong ties between North American and Central Asian mountain stakeholders.

The value of this bridge-building work has not gone unnoticed. The governors of Montana, Utah, and Wyoming addressed letters of support to the conference and two former governors—Judy Martz of Montana and Olene Walker of Utah—both attended the event. Several North American organizations also presented their work. Vista 360, for example, organizes international mountain festivals to build mountain-to-mountain cooperation, using arts and creativity to make the connection. It sustains its programs by bringing mountain

arts and textiles to North American markets, providing substantial incomes to primarily female artisans while raising money to expand the program to new communities. Other mountain-focused presentations were shared by staff and researchers from Brigham Young University, The Banff Centre, the University of Montana, The Mountain Institute, the University of New Mexico, and the Navajo Native American Nation.

Both Utah Valley State College and Vista 360 recently became members of the Mountain Partnership. With this leadership and strong participation from Rocky Mountain institutions, one can ardently hope that the Women of the Mountains conference might augur new dynamism in the participation of North American mountain stakeholders in the international mountain political agenda.

In spite of strong participation by Rocky Mountain states, the scope of the conference was truly international, with participants from all over the world. In addition to the variety of papers presented by international conference participants, an Ambassadorial roundtable featured representatives of 5 countries: Albania, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, and Turkmenistan. The Vice-President of El Salvador also addressed the audience via satellite video.

The participants shared many success stories that showed the skills of women as innovative entrepreneurs. Many of these stories were linked to women's role as repositories of cultural knowledge. There appear to be markets for high-quality traditional arts and crafts.

A lack of data hampers effective analyses leading to specific policies

addressing women's safety and security. Researchers at Brigham Young University (Utah) shared comparative statistical data on a variety of variables including trafficking, sex ratios, and legal protection worldwide. The project, entitled WomanStats, expressed willingness to devote a specific category to mountain women.

The Conference led to the "Orem Declaration of Mountain Women," which synthesizes the claims of participants and reaffirms the specific role of women in mountain communities and environments. It will be published via the Mountain Forum.

Conference proceedings will also be compiled and published on CD-ROM, in hard-copy, and in electronic form. A web site will also be created by Mountain Forum to help the participants share success stories and continue to collaborate after the close of the conference.

Some participants hoped to conduct such an event on an annual basis. Albania expressed its desire to host another such event, as did Guatemala and Nepal. We look forward to the continuation of this exciting journey next year in Albania.

Conference web site:

<http://www.womenofthemountains.org>

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