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Contact

Melissa Weber, Director of Communications
Phone: 320-589-6414, weberm@morris.umn.edu

Jenna Ray, Editor/Writer
Phone: 320-589-6068, jrray@morris.umn.edu

Imagine Fund Awards allow Professors Lawrence and Rothchild to collaborate on study of women politicians in India

Summary: The research will develop strategies to empower women leaders in their communities.

(December 21, 2010)-Pareena Lawrence, professor of economics and management and Division of the Social Sciences chair, and Jennifer Rothchild, associate professor of sociology, received a 2010 Imagine Fund award emphasizing their combined research strengths in issues of women and development. Their project, “From Autobiography to Political Empowerment in Haryana,” took them to villages in the Indian states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh to study women politicians.

Lawrence identified the study from a survey project she previously conducted. When considering ways to solve the problems noted, she invited Rothchild’s help for the benefit of her expertise with qualitative methodology and analysis. Collaborator Christopher Butler, sociology teaching specialist, was also instrumental in developing this venture.

But the project hinged on a paradox. The Indian government had pushed for women’s inclusion in government and allotted to them 50 percent of the seats in village level administration. Initial excitement over the role of Sarpanch (village council head) was surpassed by a mindset that bound many of these elected officials to debilitating cultural traditions and family dynamics, adversely affecting their participation. Their positions carried real responsibilities, however, requiring that they be more than figureheads. Lawrence and Rothchild collected their stories, they said, because “the most marginalized people are the ones whose stories need to be told.”

The duo set about trying to address problems that arose from within their context, focusing on bridging relationships and including collaborators. They attacked problems in phases, capitalizing on Lawrence’s survey project and Lawrence and Rothchild’s earlier life history project. Students from Indian regional universities were trained to facilitate focus groups and collect the women’s stories, giving the project a capacity-building component. “The students were empowered by the research they’ve done,” says Lawrence.

Focus group interviews clearly showed the women’s ambivalence toward their new, unfamiliar roles in society. One Sarpanch in Haryana wondered, “If all work is done by women, then where will the men go?” and suggested that the men should start cooking. Another Sarpanch revealed an indirect approach that assured the work was done without changing societal norms. “[My husband] is responsible for doing all village-related development work. I am responsible for making tea and food for the officers and villagers,” she said. Surely this was not the government’s intent.

By contrast, women Sarpanchs in the bordering state of Himachal Pradesh “have had greater success transcending the socio-cultural barriers, embracing their new identity as community representatives,” Lawrence says, often differentiated by literacy. One woman related reading a legal document and accurately explaining the court’s decision to the villagers, gaining their respect. Her story concluded with the realization that “an illiterate person should not be a Sarpanch. There are a lot of problems for an illiterate person.”

Even the women's demeanor reflected their environment, culture, and geography, determining the character of their group. For example, a group from the state of Himachal who knew each other was comfortable conversing and discussing problems. In neighboring Haryana, the group members did not know each other and were quieter.

All of these observations work toward the goal of designing workshops on finding solutions to the challenges facing the Sarpanchs in Haryana. Achieved by bringing together women from both states to "share stories about the challenges and opportunities within this newly opened space," the workshops will lead to strategies for more "actualized political identities." Lawrence's students are preparing transcriptions of the focus group stories paving the way for Lawrence and Rothchild to analyze them for patterns key to constructing the workshop curriculum. They plan to return to India next summer to help facilitate discussion and reflection workshops with both Himachal and Haryana women Sarpanchs focused on curriculum implementation.

Lawrence and Rothchild both permit their research and teaching to inform each other, and they will bring the women's stories, rich with meaning, into their classrooms. They will continue to compile stories and write articles, eventually combining them into a single volume.

Lawrence and Rothchild are among 17 Morris professors who received all-University 2010 Imagine Fund Awards. The program is supported in part by the McKnight Arts and Humanities Endowment. The endowment's mission is to support, sustain, and enliven arts and humanities research and activities on the four University campuses.

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