

Statement

Parallel event “Student Engaged Learning to empower mountain women and girls” 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women Noorani Barkat, Ph.D. candidate, Washington State University

It's my pleasure to be talking in the session “Student Engaged Learning to Empower Mountain Women and Girls” on “The Role of agriculture in empowering women to end poverty in the Mountains of Pakistan.” My presence at the 63rd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women as a member of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University, happened because of my participation at the Fourth International Women of the Mountains Conference in Utah in 2015. It was hosted under the umbrella of the United Nations Mountain Partnership; with support from Deann Torsak and Tony Media, I was able to speak about status of children's education in the mountains of Pakistan. The most remarkable thing during it was that I lived at Deann's house, a non-traditional student and mother of four teenagers. I got to meet another participant, Sejuti from India. It was remarkable that by being mountain women we shared with each other recipes of our favorite dishes and family stories of living in mountains, instead of feeling animosities as representatives of the LDS, Muslim, & Hindu faiths, since then I call Deann as my mommy.

I hail from Hunza Valley in Pakistan where women are struggling a lot, facing challenges & are empowering themselves via agriculture. I have huge respect for the women working tirelessly in the fields. Almost every woman in the community is involved in agriculture. Improving agriculture is also an important focus for UN sustainable development goals which plans to bring poverty and hunger level down to zero by 2030. I was the first girl in my town to choose agriculture as a field of study, because it is considered a non-traditional field. However, I had my own reasons for choosing it; to get a degree in agriculture to help not just my community but the communities around the world. I drew my inspiration from my parents who have been staunch believers of giving back to the community & that's what they instilled in their children, too. In a society like Pakistan, most of the girls have no right to make their life choices, but I got fortunate to have such parents who supported me and allowed me to choose my own career path. I now play my part in educating the youth of our society and motivate them to never give up on their Dreams.

I visited USA in 2012 as an exchange student in my undergraduate program, funded by US State department. In 2015, I started master's program at Texas A & M on US-aid scholarship. I learnt about the scientific progress in agriculture under the constant supervision of my two mentors, Dr. Bhimu Patil and Dr. G.K Jayaprakasha. I published a scientific paper too but it was only made possible due to their constant support, they believed in me even when I did not believe in myself. My current Ph.D. supervisor, Dr. Markus Keller at Washington State University is helping me academically & morally, also provided me with a diverse cultural group to work with. I am working on grapes to see how drought stress and heat stress can impact physiology, development & fruiting in grapevine.

Females there mostly rely on their own experience for growing next year's crops that results in usually low output due to lack of technical knowledge, resources, financial support, no help with market access and so on. Most of the women experience health conditions like back pain, bone

deformities, and hernia by the time they get to their forties due to carrying heavy loads and don't get treatment on time. I would like to continue to work with Utah international Mountain Forum and other organizations to come up with initiatives that can help farming communities worldwide. In future, I dream of building schools for underprivileged children too. Please empower your daughters, sisters and wives, & tell them "You can do it, you can dream high & we are here for you" & hopefully the world will be a much better place for all of us.