



Celebrating International Mountain Day at Utah Valley University

WOMEN MOVE MOUNTAINS

The theme of this year's 13th annual International Mountain Day observation was "Women move mountains" as defined by the FAO of the UN. It was observed on 6th December 2022 at Utah Valley University hosted by Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University (UVU). UIMF has been advocating for sustainable mountain development in the State of Utah and globally since 2011 via the Student Engaged Learning (SEL) model. This event depicts how the UIMF has been using the SEL model to solve the need-of-the-hour problems with a mentor (also a faculty at UVU), who educates and empowers the students (traditional and non-traditional) for their upcoming careers.



Members of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University host the International Mountain Day

The Event began with Introductory remarks given by Joshua Kooyman who is the president of the Sustainable Mountain Development (SMD) Club at UVU and is also majoring in National Security at UVU. Dr. Baldomero Lago, the first speaker of this event, is the Chief International Officer at UVU. He has also hosted the 1st International Academic Conference this October 2022 on “Why It Matters” focused on the UN’s 2020 agenda - 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Dr. Lago started his remarks with the main importance of the IMD’s theme and emphasized how women play a key role in their livelihoods and communities across the globe. He also stressed how unknowingly we are so much dependent on the mountains and how mountains give so much to the living and hindrances in the process will have impacts on the coming generations. Also, he shared the importance of promoting gender equality, strengthening alliances globally, and resilience in mountain communities.



Dr. Baldomero Lago, Chief International Officer at UVU speaks at the event

Moving on, Dr. Rusty Butler spoke next. He is a UN ECOSOC main representative for the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences (RANS) and former Associate Vice President for International Affairs and Diplomacy and the Director of The Utah Russia Institute. Under his leadership, UIMF members have participated in every session of the UNCSW from 2017 to 2022. Dr. Butler pointed out the demographics of the UVU and the SEL model and how traditional, as well as a large number of non-traditional students, have also benefitted from it by getting involved with different organizations for continued mountain advocacy.



Dr. Rusty Butler, UN ECOSOC main representative for the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences speaks at the event

He presented the facts about the UIMF which consists of clubs such as Foreign affairs, SMD club, Model United Nations, and Rotaract via the SEL model encourages students to participate in club activities and to contribute their own talents to implement SMD while gaining professional skills from Mountain partnership under the FAO. The Mountain Partnership coordinates the SMD globally through its 450 members including UVU and RANS. He also mentioned how the student coalition members adopted and implemented SDGs especially targets 6.6, 15.1, and 15.4 so as to ensure SMD in mountain communities within the 2030 agenda. Moreover, Dr. Butler mentioned the advocacy of SMD by hosting foreign dignitaries at UVU via the SEL model from Kenya, Fiji, Hungary, India, Romania, Macedonia, Kyrgyz republic, Switzerland, Greece, Georgia, Germany, Uzbekistan, and many more.



UVU faculty and students in the audience

Furthermore, he spoke about Women of the mountains conferences held at UVU which is UVU's major initiative to contribute to SMD and promote gender advocacy in North America. Finally, he emphasized the advocacy of women of the mountains at the UN via which UVU and RANS involved students through the SEL model at different forums of the ECOSOC of sustainable development since 2016 which led to the participation in sessions of the CSW and advocacy for mountain women.

Next, Jokudu Jada (Winnie), a political science international student at UVU and a member of UVU Rotaract spoke during the session. Winnie is from Sudan. In this event, she shared the current status of women in Sudan and South Sudan. She shared her knowledge about the number of issues faced in her country encountered while maintaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the largest concerns is SDG 5, Gender Inequality. She pressed on the fact that how in the name of tradition, gender-based violence is being enforced on women.



Jokudu Jada (Winnie), a political science international student at UVU speaks during the session

Laws prohibit women from their basic rights to wear as they wish, child marriage as well as being represented in government. Female genital mutilation, physical and sexual abuse from military/ government officials, gender health disparities, and lack of education are some of the common issues faced by 20th-century women and girls on a day-to-day basis. She also shared her experience in public places wherein the women who aren't dressed "properly" were punished by the haram (modesty) police by stripping. Winnie has campaigned in "Ana Ma Mara Sakit" translation, "I am not just a woman" (UN mission in South Sudan) which is to end gender inequality to bring awareness through which she visited schools, churches, and villages talking about the importance of education and their birthrights. She is looking forward to bringing change when she goes back and hereby apply the SEL model for the empowerment of women in Sudan.

Handen Torsak another student of UVU studying political science was also a speaker for this event. He has personally lived in the mountain communities of the USA and

Slovakia. During this session, he speaks about some mountain women who have greatly impacted his life, one of them being his mother.



Handen Torsak, UVU political science student speaks about mountain women

He shared his mother's experiences as a non-traditional student at UVU and was also the executive secretary that helped coordinate and organizes the UIMF at the UN conference in 2015. He went on how he came to know two more women from the Pakistani mountains through his mom, Mehak and Noorani who is part of the Women of the Mountain organization whose main agenda is gender equality and SMD. Handen got to know these people more closely, especially their culture and way of life. Noorani's aim was to study agriculture in the USA and help her folks develop in Pakistan. Meanwhile, Noorani was a filmmaker and raised awareness and supported the needy mountain minorities back in Pakistan. Meeting these women, Handen had the opportunity to understand the diversity in culture and yet how they all come under the common roof of mountains. Through all this experience,

Handen learned that tolerance towards different diversities, helping others thrive, kindness, building bridges of trust, team effort, and focusing on commonalities can help us in the long run.

The final speaker was me and I attended the event virtually. I am honored to be a part of this event because of which I was able to expand my horizons on my fellow speakers' live experiences and learned about women around the world especially in Sudan, Pakistan, and Utah.



Priyanka Prem Kumar, member of UIMF, speaks at the event virtually

As a research analyst by profession, I spend a lot of time understanding and improving food security, especially in the mountainous regions of India. I began by pointing out the gender inequality happening in diverse fields. I presented statistics from World Bank, National Crime Records Bureau, and Voluntary National Review which establishes the fact that violent crimes against women result in unequal opportunities and a decline in female labor force participation. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact of rise of women in the IT sector in India over the past 10 years especially the youth and I am a living example of this growth. As a research

intern for AI for Rural (AIR), I had the opportunity to research the mountain regions of Jharkhand and publish my academic publication paper “Assessment of Sustainable Food Systems in the rural and mountains regions of India - A case study of AIR” and this paper was then presented on the “ Why It Matters” conference on SDGs in UVU. This paper focused on improving the livelihoods of smallholder farmers, especially women in vulnerable regions through sustainable development with the help of Artificial Intelligence. I ended my speech with the final note of how women being poor decision-makers in the community have to be educated and empowered. They are an important “resource” which are untapped and to improve agriculture, investment in them will be proved successful if they are provided with the necessary resources. Women are no more just the fruit bearers in the name of development but leaders and initiators in the forthcoming generation.

Later, an award ceremony took place in which certificates were provided from the UN-FAO’s Mountain Partnership in recognition of the efforts of those who contributed to SMD in 2022. This ceremony was conducted by Stephan Atkinson, President of the Foreign Affairs club, and Vice President of the Foreign Affairs club, Rachel Welker.

In the end, Alitha Thompson, UIMF president gave the concluding remarks. This March, I am looking forward to continuing the advocacy by participating in the sixty-seventh session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women led under UVU Rotaract President Tristin Juarez--Smith by hosting a parallel event with the Russian Academy of Natural Science and Utah China Fish D&C.

Priyanka Prem Kumar, member of UIMF