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Susan Weinger

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Nutrition and health in Bangladesh and Cambodia explored by WMU researcher

Advancing the knowledge of rural Bangladeshi women about gardening and nutrition and increasing access to basic health care services and information for Cambodian school children was the foci of Dr. Susan Weinger’s research and volunteerism on a three-month overseas trip in summer 2010.

The journey for Weinger, a Western Michigan University social work professor, began as a research volunteer for Helen Keller International—Bangladesh, in early May in the districts of Dinajpur and Jessore.

"I carried out a qualitative evaluation research project concerning an NGO’s gardening and nutrition surveillance project," Weinger said. "The project provided training in gardening,
farming and nutrition to local agencies, which then taught rural women how to make their
gardens more productive and ensure adequate nutrition for their
families."

Weinger traveled to rural areas and interviewed more than 30
women on the porches of their
mud and hatched roof houses,
communicating with them
through the help of an interpreter.
She conducted two weeks of
work in the field, traveling by
van or train to rural villages
where the gardening project
had been completed a few years
previously.

"We were there to see the lasting impacts," she said. "We walked through the rice paddies where
the people haven't had a lot of contact with outsiders. The children were very cute, following me
around and wanting to play games. People were very curious—asking me questions about all
sorts of things not related to the research."

She said historically the women farm in small plots of land around their houses without any
formal training in agricultural techniques, such as how to plant seeds, when and how much to
water the plants, and how to select the best vegetables to grow. Spinach, okra, and pumpkin, are
examples of some of the vegetables grown in Bangladesh. Some highly nutritious non-native
bean plants were also introduced through the program.

"Primarily, the rural women who were beneficiaries of the
program did not know the food value (vitamins) of these
vegetables," she said. "The program reintroduced these
vegetables and explained their nutritional value so that they
would not be overlooked. For example, the program suggested a
stew-like recipe made from local vegetables called 'Khichuri’
that is rich in vitamins to help meet the growth needs of young children."
Weinger determined that by introducing a new recipe featuring locally grown vegetables the project succeeded in raising the women’s interest in growing them. The project also helped dispel the myth that non-native vegetables like cabbage, cauliflower, and carrots are more nutritious than native vegetables such as spinach and redleaf. Additionally, by recognizing the nutritional value of local vegetables and gaining the ability to increase harvests from their limited garden plots, the women were able to serve their families more nutritious vegetables year round.

"Social work is about trying to help people and correcting some injustices that comes from a sense that the world needs to be more just,” she said. “We just can't have people living in this kind of economic cruelty. When people have to live in situations where survival needs are the focus of their day from morning till night, it’s not right. That limits people’s potential development and ability to have happier lives."

Cambodia

In early June, Weinger headed to Cambodia, where she volunteered for the American Assistance for Cambodia. The agency administers and facilitates several programs to help people living in poverty in remote rural areas, including building schools, providing computer and English lessons, and providing financial support to make it possible for more
children to attend school. Some medical assistance is also delivered to rural residents through the program.

As part of her research work in that country, Weinger proposed three possible program expansion ideas to become the focus of a grant. The AAC administrators selected Weinger’s proposal to offer through the school system basic health care and educational programs about nutrition, sanitation and hygiene to rural children.

"The idea was that by getting acquainted with the needs and goals of the agency I might be able to write a grant that would help them advance their work," she said. "I will write a grant to get nurses into public schools. For all the country’s public schools there are only 7 nurses—it's not enough. A lot of illnesses are caused by poor hygiene and poor sanitation. Educating the children that the water needs to be boiled, on how to handle water to keep it clean, and how to wash hands, are all pieces of knowledge they can tell their families about. The children really appreciated our lessons and took them very seriously."

With school nurses on board, Weinger said children would not have to suffer headaches and other minor ailments that distract them from learning because they’d easily be able to receive treatment at school. “I met a child at school one day who had a bad headache, something cured simply in the U.S., but the child usually wouldn’t have mentioned it to anyone—without a nurse in the building she’d just have to suffer,” Weinger said.

Weinger returned to Michigan in late summer and got to work identifying foundations and governmental entities to which she can submit grant proposals to begin the school nurse program in Cambodia. In addition to her research and work overseas, Weinger said she greatly enjoyed learning more about each country’s history and culture.
"Social work has an emphasis in that everyone has to be included,” she said. “Diversity is a strength and a value, so there's a lot of emphasis in WMU’s curriculum on race and culture and on how to eliminate discrimination. My interest in culture is one of the reasons I entered into social work. In both Asian countries the unfairness in the distribution of wealth—internally and across nations—was glaring. The amazing drive, endurance, kindness and resilience of the people of both nations will be a lasting memory and I had a very enriching experience that I brought back to share with my students.”

Story by Nate Coe