Human Rights Activist Dr. Sima Samar Gives Inside Look at Afghan Women’s Issues at CIEE

CIEE hosted Maine students and community members for a discussion with Sima Samar, M.D., chair of the first human rights commission in Afghanistan, and Lauren Lovelace, executive director of the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council, based at Georgetown University.


Special guest Lauren Lovelace, Afghanistan expert and executive director of the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council at Georgetown University, led the dialogue focused on critical issues related to women’s rights, health, and education in the region.

During the 90-minute event, which was also streamed live to nearly 100 CIEE alumni and staff in 18 countries, Dr. Samar spoke about establishing the first human rights commission in her country, the challenges of educating about human rights, and the importance of women in society, citing the rise in the number of girls attending school as evidence that this message is finally gaining traction. Twelve years ago, girls in Afghanistan didn’t attend school; now, half a million attend classes every day.

Also during her talk, Dr. Samar emphasized the critical role women play in creating peace. “There’s a lot of hope for the future in Afghanistan,” she said. “Unless you have the support of women in the peace process … that peace can’t be sustained.” Dr. Samar answered questions from the audience, including one from an alum of CIEE’s Work and Travel program and Civic Leadership Summit who was participating in the event from her home in Romania.

Dr. Samar and James P. Pellow, Ed.D., president and CEO of CIEE, met earlier in her visit with a group of students from Deering and Waynflete high schools in Portland. Dr. Samar encouraged students to empower themselves by learning about the world, and in particular, about cultures vastly different from their own. She voiced her belief that women should actively seek other women as mentors and leaders throughout their lives, naming Djamila Bouhired, a strong voice for Algerian independence, as a key influence in her life.

CIEE has partnered with the University of Maine School of Law for the past three years to present the Justice for Women Lecture Series. Founded by Cathy Lee of Lee International, Inc., this annual event brings internationally recognized and distinguished speakers to Portland, Maine, for global conversations about justice for women and girls in the developing world. Dr. Samar is the third speaker in the series, which was launched in 2012.

“Each year, the Justice for Women Lecture Series offers people in Maine the chance to interact with an extraordinary global leader, exposing new perspectives, cultures, and styles in leadership,” said Pellow. “This series offers a rare opportunity for Portland’s community and student leaders to meet women who have overcome extreme adversity and remained dedicated to global causes grounded in universal values. These extraordinary women – judges, doctors, and Nobel Laureates – offer lessons that are equally as important to leaders on a global stage as they are to student leaders right here in Maine. Our hope is that Dr. Samar’s story of
courage and determination will inspire all of us to take positive action in our communities.”

Sima Samar, M.D.

Born and educated in Afghanistan, Dr. Samar has long fought for the welfare and rights of Afghan women, often at risk to her life. As chair of the first human rights commission in Afghanistan’s history, she oversees human and women’s rights education programs and investigates rights abuses throughout the country. In 1989, she founded the Shuhada Organization, which operates more than 100 schools and 15 clinics and hospitals for Afghan citizens. She also served as the first minister of women's affairs in the Interim Administration of Afghanistan. Dr. Samar’s relentless efforts have captured worldwide attention, and she is one of four women featured in “Daughters of Afghanistan,” a 2004 documentary film.

CIEE: Council on International Educational Exchange

Founded in 1947, CIEE is the country’s oldest and largest nonprofit study abroad and intercultural exchange organization, serving 300 U.S. colleges and universities, 1,000 U.S. high schools, and more than 35,000 international exchange students each year. CIEE operates 60 study centers in 40 countries, sponsors international faculty training programs, teach abroad programs, and various specialty and custom programs for secondary, postsecondary, and international students. Visit www.ciee.org.
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