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September 23, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Shannon O'Rourke of Grand Rapids, Mich., a junior international studies major at Illinois Wesleyan University, compiled a fact sheet this summer that was published on the Web site of the U.S. Department of State.

The document summarizes the goals and progress of 21 State Department-supported programs that are committed to educating and empowering women in the Middle East. According to O'Rourke, in order to raise awareness and promote U.S. policy, a fact sheet similar to the one she created is published for every region of the world where initiatives supported by the State Department are underway.

Shannon O'Rourke

O'Rourke, a graduate of Forest Hills Central High School, said that the project was the result of about one week of work at her summer internship with the Office of International Women's Issues, a division of the State Department's Office of the Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs.

Over the course of the nine-week internship, O'Rourke researched a variety of international women's rights issues, including domestic violence in Mexico, property rights in Africa, and the psychological effects of child marriage in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

O'Rourke also evaluated the increased productivity of nations that recently began allowing women to own property. She hopes that her findings will support the argument that protecting women's rights benefits the government as well as all citizens, not just women, of any given country.

The internship provided O'Rourke the opportunity to interact with three delegations of Iraqi women brought to Washington, D.C., by the State Department.
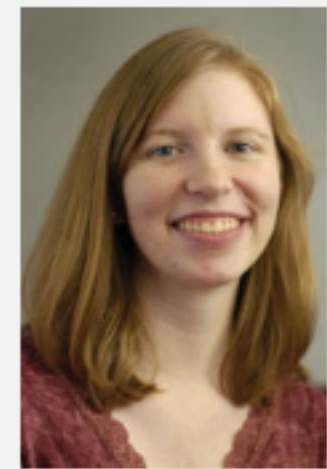
In addition to attending meetings and seminars with the delegates, O'Rourke made a personal connection with the third delegation of women when she picked them up at the airport, arranged for their hotel stay, and listened to their opinions about the political situation in their homeland as she took them shopping and sight-seeing.

Next summer, O'Rourke hopes to intern with a non-governmental organization, where she might seek a slightly different position. "[In addition to research,] I could see myself doing more advocacy and being more of a lobbyist," she said.

A member of the national service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega, O'Rourke also conducts research for the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, a non-profit organization that works for international justice and peace by empowering oppressed people around the world.

On the IWU campus, O'Rourke serves on the Student Senate and also arranges local philanthropic activities for the members of DRL (Death, Resurrection, Life), a student-run Christian organization.

O'Rourke hopes to go on to graduate school and then would like to work with oppressed women overseas and speak with them firsthand about obtaining the rights they deserve.