

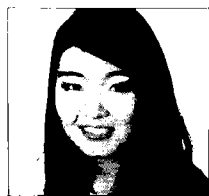
IN HER OWN WORDS

Helping Mongolian Girls Find the Key to Their Careers

By Gansuud "Pearl" Oyunbaatar, a graduate intern in the Women's Center at the University of Minnesota.

I started my graduate studies in Human Resource Development at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in 2011.

After graduating three years earlier from the National University of Mongolia, my new career choice had taken me thousands of miles away from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. UM's Human Resource Development Program was among the Top 5 HRD Programs in the world. I have always enjoyed working with people and organizing events, helping people develop their potential and talents within a work or organizational setting, and so I settled into my internship with the Women's Center at the UM. However, as an undergraduate student, I majored in social work without any career guidance, which explains the long time to find my profession calling.



Gansuud "Pearl" Oyunbaatar

My not-so-clear career path

In Mongolia, many young women such as myself do not get career guidance and lack information on various career paths. In secondary school, especially in 12th grade, students take entrance exams for colleges and universities. Students follow their peers, interests and instincts to some extent in their choice to take the entrance exams for particular undergraduate majors. I wanted to attend the National University of Mongolia with my friend and I wanted to choose an undergraduate program in the same department my friend chose. My friend chose sociology and I chose social work.

I would note both of my parents have worked as public servants in their careers, as a schoolteacher and as an officer of the law, and social work seemed like a natural choice for me. However, I had no idea what social work entailed and how my career goals aligned with my major. The only certain thing was my excitement to attend the university.

Once I chose social work, there was no option to change my undergraduate major without falling behind my peers. After I graduated, I ended up going into the private sector, specializing in customer service instead of working as a social worker. I was still searching for my career calling. I believe meeting with a career counselor, participating in a career workshop or meeting with an expert in social work prior to choosing my major would have steered me in the right direction.

Influences for young Mongolian women

In 2001, The Mongolian Center for Youth and Adolescent Development found the leading influences on a student's choice of professions were parents' careers and mostly information gained from others. The main obstacles to making informed decisions were

- lack of information on professions/fields,
- lack of guidance service on professions,
- lack of lectures, seminars or workshops on professions at secondary schools,
- lack of information on the labor market, and
- lack of actionable information regarding universities

and businesses.

This was the reality when I graduated from secondary school in 2004. Things have not significantly changed since then. Although the study was gender neutral, I believe it is an issue that affects young women and it resonated with me personally.

While working as a graduate intern at the Women's Center, University of Minnesota, I have learned so much about equity, success and leadership by participating in the workshops, meeting with women experts in their professional fields and working on my independent project program design.

Keys to a successful career

My project's focus will be to teach young Mongolian women in secondary school about career and life planning. The "Use Your Own Key" project will consist of seminars, lectures, workshops and field experiences designed to provide actionable information, familiarize female students with many professions/career fields and give them insights and guidance from professionals so that each student has the tools and opportunity to make the good choice.

The seminars, lectures and workshops will be designed and taught by myself and guest experts in various professions. I want to help young female students (like myself at one point) choose the right profession; discover their unique talents, interests and skills; make well-considered decisions; and build their confidence to apply those skills in academic and/or professional settings.

Based on the fact that Mongolia's population is very small (approximately 3 million), a project to increase guidance and mentoring for young women's career paths at secondary schools is very feasible and could lead to real results in bridging the gap between choices that lead to unemployment and choices that lead to a career.

The top three lessons students will learn are objective self-assessment of interests and skills, related decision making based on comprehensive and diligent research on various suitable careers, and life-long learning and development.

One's career paths are not always straightforward, but I believe finding work that is fulfilling and reaching one's potential is key to a successful life. In the spirit of the Women's Center's vision to advance equity, success and leadership for women, I see a great need for career counseling in the precious time between secondary school and through college in Mongolia, and this project will address the need and help young women get the right start on their journey toward fulfilling their potential in careers that become their passion or life-long joy. ■

Gansuud "Pearl" Oyunbaatar has a BA degree in social work from the National University of Mongolia, and in May 2014 she graduated with her MEd degree in human resource development from the University of Minnesota. Gansuud intends to focus on independent projects when she returns to Mongolia and develop women's leadership and career counseling throughout her career in human resources. She may be reached at oyunb001@umn.edu.