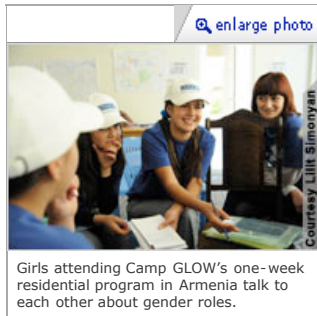


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A Camp in Armenia Helps Girls Find Opportunity



By Judi Hasson

Special Correspondent

Washington — Before 15-year-old Manu Avaguan discovered a leadership camp called GLOW for girls in Armenia, her life was bland. She says there were no real dreams for her to aspire to, and she was frightened of taking risks.

But all that has changed. Last year, Avaguan, of Sisian, Armenia, spent six days with 39 other secondary school girls from small towns and villages at Camp GLOW. The initials stand for Girls Leading Our World, a residential camp that operates in 21 countries. The program is run with the help of the U.S. State Department and will operate its third summer season in Armenia in 2010.

Camp GLOW was a coming-of-age experience for Avaguan. The program stresses teamwork and leadership, encourages participants to become active citizens, and seeks to build self-esteem. It targets girls between the ages of 12 and 16.

"The role of women in Armenia, especially in rural areas, remains a traditional one," said Lilit Simonyan, director of Armenia's Camp GLOW. "Future female leaders are held back by a lack of information and opportunities concerning career options, life options and leadership development, as well as a culturally induced lack of support for strong, enterprising women," Simonyan said. GLOW hopes to break down barriers that hold women back.

"It was a very important step just to take part" in the camp, Avaguan said in an e-mail. "I was really afraid of participating in things, but after GLOW, I gained the self-confidence and belief that nothing was really impossible."

Emboldened by the summer camp, she applied to and was accepted by the State Department's Future Leaders Exchange program, which recruits secondary students to participate in exchange programs. She is studying this year at a school in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, where she is in the 10th grade.



GLOW opened Avaguan's eyes to further opportunities. Armenia is a hard place for a woman to succeed, she said; many families restrict their daughters until they marry. "In my mind, it is important for a woman to know her role in life and not just to give in," she said. "GLOW gives you an opportunity to see more clearly the current problems of gender inequity, and it gives you an idea about how to find solutions."

There is work to be done to help young women in a country that is still finding its way in the 21st century, according to Simonyan, the camp director. There are obstacles for an Armenian woman who tries to get a managerial position in the private sector, for instance, and women play a minor role in national and local governments.

But, like women's movements in other parts of the world, GLOW hopes to change attitudes and break down barriers that have held women back. The summer camp, which has hosted 76 Armenian girls in its first two years, is an important start toward changing attitudes and equipping girls to surmount barriers. The program also has reached more than 1,000 Armenian girls through other activities — peer

education and local events that spread the word on women's rights as human rights, on women's health, on human trafficking, and on career choices for women.

With new experiences under her belt and growing confidence, Avaguan plans to go to college, either in the United States or Armenia, and is even thinking about law school after she graduates from college.

Law school would be a big step. But "just in taking part in GLOW, I took a very important step," she said. "I understood that I could be myself and act individually."

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