

Sources: Noel Schulz, 785-532-5600, noels@k-state.edu;
Nadia Shapkina, 785-532-2790, shapkina@k-state.edu;
Sarinya Sungatavat, 785-532-2213, sarinya@k-state.edu;
and Asel Omuralieva, asel.omuralieva@gmail.com;
News release prepared by: Rachel Skybetter, 785-532-1566, rskybett@k-state.edu

News Services
Communications and
Marketing
128 Dole Hall
Manhattan, KS 66506-6902
785-532-2535
Fax: 785-532-7355
E-mail: media@k-state.edu

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WOMEN'S DAY, K-STATE AND BEYOND

MANHATTAN -- Today is International Women's Day, where women everywhere are being celebrated for their social and political contributions. But at Kansas State University, steps are being taken to empower women every day.

International Women's Day is celebrated March 8 every year, and today marks the 100th anniversary of the holiday's inception. Originally founded in Europe to support women's rights and advancements, today it is celebrated to various degrees all over the world. It's an official holiday in post-Soviet countries like Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, as well as in Afghanistan, India, China, Cambodia, Ukraine, Vietnam and many more. Women in every capacity -- mothers, daughters, sisters, co-workers, teachers, aunts and grandmothers -- are given flowers, sweets and small gifts from men, children and each other to thank and inspire women.

"On International Women's Day we celebrate by giving out flowers to all the women. The women don't do anything; everything is cooked, served and prepared by men," said Asel Omuralieva, a Kyrgyzstan resident whose husband is working on his master's degree at K-State. "Feb. 23 is Men's Day so we have this joke that men govern from Feb. 23 to March 8, and women govern from March 8 until the next Feb. 23."

But International Women's Day stands for much more than pampering women.

"The holiday means multiple things to different people. Culturally, it celebrates the relationships in your lives that involve women, and politically it recognizes women's rights and their achievements and history," said Nadia Shapkina, assistant professor of sociology at K-State. "Women's rights are human rights."

In Russia, where Shapkina is from, the day is important because it recognizes women's contributions to society, which is important to develop a global understanding of women's rights.

"We need to support female students, faculty and staff in sports, creative pursuits and academia. It's important to develop a global consciousness and support each other," Shapkina said. "It's also important to involve men because the empowerment of women is not only about women, it's about changing gender inequality."

K-State has made broad steps in female empowerment since the beginning. Before women had the right to vote, they were already taking big strides at K-State, where women's education was an important part of the university's early curricula. In 1908, 12 years before the 19th Amendment was ratified, Mary Pierce Van Zile

was named the dean of women at K-State, and in 1912 she was named dean of home economics. Many prominent women have followed in her footsteps, in human ecology and throughout the university's many departments.

"We want to make K-State the university of choice for women," said Noel Schulz, K-State's first lady and professor of electrical and computer engineering, a male-dominated field. "When K-State was founded it was 50 percent men and 50 percent women. Today we have strong female leadership on the president's cabinet. Everyone is part of the K-State family, and as we move forward, we want to make the strongest team by getting people to have a diverse set of experiences, and part of that is gender."

Sarinya Sungkatavat, a doctoral student in the department of hospitality, management and dietetics, can attest to the power a K-State education gives women. Sungkatavat, who is from Thailand, is following in the footsteps of her own mother, who got her doctorate from K-State in 1984. She is now the first female president of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Nonthaburi, Thailand. The university has more than 150,000 students and is one of the largest universities in Thailand.

"She came from a pretty poor family and it's a big deal that she is the president of a university. Education really opened up the way for my mom," Sungkatavat said. "She is my hero."

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