

## **Unity & Diversity – Celebrating Diversity at HSPH and Beyond...**

Who would have thought that mental health outcomes among child soldiers from Sierra Leone would be spoken of in the same breath as the public health consequences of sex trafficking in India, Nepal & Bangladesh; that the wave of healthcare reform in Mexico would be compared to the role of non-governmental healthcare in promoting health in China or that the need for increased accountability by the public sector in Guatemala would be discussed on the same platform as improving family planning and reproductive health in Ukraine? But there is one unifying thread that trespasses all boundaries of geography, race, ethnicity, social class and income –the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH).

The concept of diversity is evident in every aspect of life at HSPH – be it the faculty, the staff, the students or the varied domestic and international work that the school is involved in, as part of its overarching mission - “to advance the public’s health through learning, discovery, and communication.” Indeed, with 43 different countries represented this year on a single pedestal, HSPH is a true reflection of the concept of unity in diversity. The spirit of this unity is embodied as much in a Burmese student celebrating the day of Id after the month of Ramadan, as in the mirthful smile with which a Mexican student devours an artistically crafted dim sum at the Chinese New Year!

Diversity teaches us many things – from cross cultural tolerance and interpersonal relationship building to appreciating and acknowledging the needs of those who are different from us. But most importantly the spirit of unity in diversity at HSPH teaches us to be sensitive and empathetic towards the trials and tribulations faced by people who come from a varied set of cultures, backgrounds, and mindsets. It also bestows us with a unique opportunity to use this

assortment to our advantage by learning from the vast array of experiences, resources and skill sets that each one of us brings to the table.

But the question that needs to be probed into further by every HSPHer is – what does this diversity truly mean to me?... Is it just the glass façade of an office that bears the same name or the fact that you share your lunch and your spare time with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, or is it much more?... From a public health standpoint, diversity means being cognizant of the role of wide spread differences in social class, economic status and cultural milieus in providing a mind boggling range of opportunities to intervene with strategies targeted at multiple levels. It is this solid fostering in a multi-ethnic background that enables us to reflect on a given predicament from several different viewpoints. It broadens the horizons for knowledge and learning and raises the bar of expectations for our performance in the field of public health

With diversity comes disparity. While the spirit of unity in diversity portrays a picture of hope and optimism, the gruesome reality of healthcare disparities rings in a call for concentrated efforts in building a dedicated workforce to tackle this issue, drawing in from our diverse experiences, assets and capacities. Undoubtedly, if there is one field where the spirit of unity in diversity finds real – time, practical application - it is in the continued efforts made by HSPH in addressing and eliminating healthcare disparities all over the US and even internationally.

The greatest challenge then, that this spirit of unity in diversity faces, is sustenance. The lingering question that intrigues me even as I conclude this piece is – What happens next?... We live busy lives. We have our own set of goals, priorities and commitments...and suddenly one day – HARVARD happens...the next nine months (or maybe a couple of years) expose us to a richly varied mix of attitudes beliefs and opinions and then one day it is over. We snap back to

the rigmarole of our daily lives... the spirit of diversity long forgotten...But hark!...Hopefully, HSPH with its rather exceptional touch of humaneness, will leave such an indelible impression on our minds that the spirit of unity in diversity will generate a new mindset of sensitive alert and conscientious leaders from amongst us, who will prove to be a true asset to the human race. As Kofi Anan, former United Nations General Secretary once said, “We may have different religions, different languages, different colored skin, but we all belong to one human race.” Among other things, unity in diversity at HSPH lays the foundation for perceptive, insightful and committed leadership that promises to carry the torch forward for generations to come...