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## African Women's Delegation Visits Pasadena Yesterday

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A delegation of African women who are political and economic leaders in their countries visited Pasadena on Thursday as part of a tour of America with the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program.

The women met with Pasadena's Commission on the Status of Women and other community members at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in Pasadena to discuss issues such as education, economics and politics.



"The meeting is meant to bring women in leadership roles together to build connections and learn from one another," said Najeeba Syeed-Miller, executive director of the Pasadena-based Western Justice Center. The center co-sponsored the event with the commission and International Visitors Council of Los Angeles.

Several delegation members at Western Justice Center roundtable yesterday. [Photo: Gail Anderson]

From their discussion on Wednesday, the group discovered that African countries and the United States both struggle with homelessness and inadequate education.

"It's an eye-opener," said Gertrude Mthombeni of Zimbabwe. "America might be rich, but it has got its problems."

The African delegates questioned why the United States had homeless people since the nation is so wealthy. In South Africa, the government provides houses to the homeless, said Mokgadi Kgatla of South Africa.

Commission on the Status of Women Chair Cheryl Hubbard explained that Pasadena does not have rent control, which means landlords can charge as much as they please, so many people can't afford housing.

"It's just a tragedy," Hubbard said, adding many people live on the streets or seek temporary housing at shelters.

Pasadena Unified School District board member Renatta Cooper said there is an attitude in this country that "you have the right to what you can afford for yourself." Also, many homeless people are mentally ill, and unfortunately, the United States government and its citizens do not provide enough services for those people, Cooper said.

The group also addressed a problem that Africa and the United States share.

Kgatla said that many of South Africa's doctors, engineers and scientists seek jobs in the United States and other first-world countries because they can receive higher salaries. This is a challenge for South Africa because many educated leaders leave the community, she said.

Ernestine Moore, district director for Senator Jack Scott, said the United States does not produce enough skilled workers in the math and sciences domestically. That is why, the nation recruits abroad. Moore said she believes more emphasis should be placed on improving the high school drop-out rate.

"We have to create a culture more interested in education," Moore said.

The African delegates and the Americans also learned about women leaders and their roles in social and political change in their respective countries.

African delegates Aishatu Atiku of Nigeria and Fatuma Abass of Kenya spoke of the need to for women to gain high-ranking positions in the workforce and political seats in their countries. Abass talked about an effort in her country to educate young girls.

"Everything revolves around men," Atiku said. "We are not allowed to vie for political post."

In contrast, Khange Dlamini of Swaziland said girls receive the same education as boys and perform better in school. As part of an agreement through the Southern African Development Community, consisting of 14 countries, Swaziland must have at least 30 percent of its political seats be held by women.

Judge Terry J. Hatter, WJCF Vice Chair, said he thinks it is wonderful spots are set aside for women in government. In the United States, women can run for office, but a certain number does not have to be elected. Cooper added she is the only woman on the school board.

Prior to coming to Pasadena, the African delegates visited Iowa City, Iowa, Washington D.C., and Charlotte, N.C. In Iowa City, they met presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Chris Dodd and Bill Richardson.

The delegates were selected by American officials overseas. More than 200 current and former heads of state, 1,500 cabinet-level ministers and other world leaders have participated in the program, according to the U.S. Department of State's Web site.

During the African delegates stay in Southern California, the women also met Congresswoman Diane Watson, visited the Business Technology Center of Los Angeles and dined with members of the Service Employees International Union. Pasadena was the last stop of their tour.

Judge Dorothy Nelson, WJCF Chair, is grateful for Wednesday's exchange. She thinks it's important for women around the world to know and love each other. "I look at women and men as two wings of a bird," Nelson said. "Unless both wings are strong, the bird can't fly."