



ACTION for GIRLS

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Girls' Rights are Human Rights

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Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals: From Commitment to Reality for Girls

by Roberta Ross, International Council of Jewish Women



In the year 2000, an unprecedented 189 United Nations member states agreed to improve the lot of all human beings in the areas of development and poverty eradication, peace and security, and human rights. This Millennium Declaration acknowledged the importance of gender equality and it confirmed the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and the outcome documents of the many world conferences that had taken place in the decade leading up to the millennium.

The reaffirmation of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action is especially critical in the fight for girls' rights, without which women's rights cannot be achieved. Section L of the BPFA is the most comprehensive statement of girls' rights in any international document to date. It points out that, "In many countries, available indicators show that the girl child is discriminated against from the earliest stages of life and into adulthood....Girls are often treated as inferior and are socialized to put themselves last, thus undermining their self esteem."

In the BPFA governments call attention to the need to overcome the gender stereotypes that prevail in many societies in order to allow girls to develop their full potential. The Secretary-General in his introduction to the ten-year review of the BPFA noted that women (and by inference, girls) have made remarkable gains. However, the *[cont'd p. 2]*

Raise Your Voice—We Can Do It!

by Margery Cohen, League of Women Voters of the U.S.

The promises made in Beijing in 1995 and repeated at the Millennium Summit in 2000 will only be kept if we raise our voices and demand that our governments honor their pledges. Speak up. Get involved. Join others. Not one voice but many!

The Millennium Campaign

<http://www.millenniumcampaign.org/>

Raise your voice. Join the campaign. Visit the "Action Center" and find out what you can do. Check out the "Country Info" to see what's happening in your country.

Global Call to Action Against Poverty

www.whiteband.org

This worldwide alliance is committed to making world leaders live up to their promises, and to making a breakthrough on poverty in 2005. Join the white band campaign and show the world that you want action, not just words.

UN Cyber School Bus—MDG Site

<http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/mdgs/index.asp>

The UN CyberSchoolBus site is full of information and advocacy suggestions for students and teachers, as well as links to other youth-oriented sites.

TakingITGlobal

<http://www.takingitglobal.org>

Designed especially for youth with games, action guides and youth written policy papers, this web site is full of ideas and activities for local youth campaigns.

Women's Environment Development Organization

<http://www.wedo.org/>

WEDO is an international organization that advocates for women's equality in global policy. Its web site offers insight and action suggestions on a number of women's issues.

Monitor your governments' efforts. Organize town hall meetings. Offer to speak to women's organizations, school groups and faith communities.

Raise Your Voice—We Can Do It!

remaining gender inequality must be acknowledged, as it continues to affect the lives of women, girls and their communities.

Further progress requires that we examine both the law and traditional attitudes that give rise to: gender-based discrimination and violence; trafficking and prostitution; victimization of females in conflict situations; political powerlessness; poverty; and lack of access to education for girls.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whose progress will be reviewed the September 14-16 World Summit, spell out specific targets for the people of the world that, if met, will contribute to improvement of the situation of girls. Concerns have been expressed that the UN member governments have been slow to implement programs that will lead to the achievement of the MDGs and that the goals themselves are not sufficiently focused on the gender equality concerns of girls and women.

While the achievement of all eight goals will impact the lives of girls positively, at least three of the MDGs are specifically focused on the girl child:

- Achieving universal primary education is critical for women and girls. The failure to reach this critical and seemingly reachable goal reveals the importance of the involvement of NGOs and civil society to bolster the efforts of governments.
- Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. In many parts of the world girls are becoming the overwhelming victims of HIV/AIDS. If this goal is to be reached, the specific vulnerabilities of girls must be recognized and addressed.
- The promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment is key to the accomplishment of all the other goals. Until women and girls are full participants in their homes and societies, none of us

will enjoy a world free from want and fear, where all are free to live in dignity. Unfortunately, this year the world will miss the first, and perhaps most critical, of all the MDG targets—gender parity in primary and secondary education.

In this globalized world, human rights experts reiterate that, under international treaties, governments' responsibilities extend beyond their responsibility to their own citizens. All governments must support international programs and agencies that will forward these goals. Developed nations must provide funding for the international institutions that are designed to reach them. Civil society must remain vigilant to ensure that governments carry out their commitments to all people and especially to girls.

From Beijing +10 to Millennium Declaration +5: It's Time to Act

By Mahira Afzal, Development Officer for Women's Programs, Pakistan Girl Guides Association, Lahore, Pakistan

It all began on March 1st at 3:30 pm as I boarded the plane in Lahore for the flight to New York.



Throughout my 18-hour journey I wondered, "What does the future hold for me?" as I prepared myself to become the first Pakistani young woman to attend the meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Nothing was as I imagined.

Early the next morning, I started walking towards the United Nations Headquarters on the streets of chilly New York City, surrounded by tall buildings and the hustle and bustle of the city. After successfully passing through UN security, I found myself in a multi-cultural sea of [cont'd p. 3]

multi-ethnic people busy with CSW activities. That is when my running from one corridor to the next began. With a pen and notepad in one hand and lots of reading material in the other, I made my way through the maze of meetings that would dominate my time at the UN. The number of tasks for each day just kept escalating.

Deep in my heart, I knew that this experience at the UN would be extraordinary, not only for me, but also for my organization and my country. But I underestimated the pride and responsibility that I would feel being part of this UN meeting. To participate in the CSW, to be part of the proceedings, to have my say in important matters and to work with the whole world community, was certainly the chance of a lifetime. It was also an amazing learning experience for me—to live far away from family for the very first time, to search for ‘Halal’ (Muslim) food with my German colleague, and to serve as an ambassador of my culture, values and ethics to people coming from all parts of the world.

I represented Pakistan, the Asia Pacific Region and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) in a number of different venues, but March 9th was the highlight. I heard the Chair of the CSW call up my name and knew it was time to deliver the WAGGGS statement on which we had all worked so hard. The Chair appreciated the points raised during the intervention, including the positive role media can play in the empowerment of women and girls.

During the days of discussion and the rounds of questions and answers, I felt strongly that it really does not matter how many people say that something cannot be done. It really does not matter how many have tried it before. Whatever you are doing, even if it is your first attempt, if you give it your very best effort, you are guaranteed satisfaction in the end. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.

At the UN, I not only learned a lot about the UN system, I felt it under my skin. I hope to use my international experience and the knowledge I gained to act as a bridge between the Government of Pakistan and NGOs working for the empowerment of girls and young women. I hope to be able to work with the UN to achieve the Millennium Development Goals—*now is the time to act!* I trust our sponsors will continue to provide us with the chance to represent women and girls from our part of the world at the UN, so that we can continue to share our experiences in problem solving. Without their support our accomplishments simply are not possible.

Girls Speak Out—CSW 2005

By Leslie Wright, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts



The UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) met from February 28th to March 11th 2005 to review the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA). In 1998, 15 girls under the age of 18 came from all parts of the world to participate in the CSW review of Section L, The Girl Child. One of these girls, Ms. Emma Mirzoyants, returned this year and joined other young women in hosting a “Speak Out” about the future from their perspectives. This event was held in the UN Church Center on March 7th. In addition, girls under 18 years of age held a follow up speak out March 8th to share their views with CSW participants. Ms. Miriam Lyons, who had facilitated girls’ participation in 1998 and had also [cont’d p. 4]

worked with the girl participants during the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, assisted with the planning for both of these sessions.

The statement that follows was drafted by a working group of “Speak Out” participants and shared with government delegations at the CSW panel discussion on the future, held at UN Headquarters in New York on March 9.



Text of the Statement to the CSW

Madame Chairperson, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for affording us the opportunity to address this forum on such an important topic. The girls and young women of this conference have been meeting and we would like to take this opportunity to share our suggestions for the future. We see many obstacles ahead of us in the fight for equality and women’s rights. However, we also see much hope and determination amongst us. The progress that has been made thus far can only be attributed to the women and men that have already dedicated themselves to this goal. We thank you for your perseverance and dedication toward a better tomorrow.

Now, we girls and young women ask that you include our voices in the work that lies ahead. We see this as the first step in overcoming a large barrier that girls and young women face. The right to speak out and to be heard is fundamental to ensuring that progress is, in fact, effective and suitable for the situations that we face. Girls and young women should not only be heard, but must be active decision makers in all issues that affect their lives. While forums such as this allow the voices of some girls and young women to represent concerns that most girls and young women have, the chance to be heard must be

widespread at home, school, in our countries and abroad.

The first arena that issues affecting girls and young women face, is within their family unit. Family is usually the primary influence in a young girl’s life. It is here that they must be loved, respected and protected. Their voices and positive self-esteem should be fostered to ensure their mental well-being and confidence. Continuing emphasis needs to be placed on protecting girls and young women from sexual exploitation and violence. This often becomes a larger problem when paired with family and cultural traditions. In particular this is seen in girls and young women with migrant backgrounds, as they face conflicting cultures—that of the family and that of society.

In today’s changing world, health and sanitation are key issues affecting girls and young women worldwide. An investment in the health of girls and young women today will result in a healthy future generation. We see access to pure drinking water, sanitary conditions and proper immunizations as the start to a healthy life. Additionally, women need to be encouraged to care for their physical health. Young women should be aware of the adverse implications of early marriage and early pregnancy. They should have access to information concerning their bodies and reproductive health care. These issues need to be addressed alongside the current concern over HIV/AIDS. This epidemic hits girls and young women as victims, orphans, and often results in their becoming the primary care-givers.

With such large concerns, we feel that it is imperative in today’s world to empower women socially and economically. We look to accomplish this through education. While there has been some progress in the fight for equality in education, there is still much left to accomplish. Every girl has the right to a formal education. *[cont’d p. 5]*

Still many girls are forced to work outside the home instead of attending school. This stops the development of girls and young women and prevents them from becoming leaders. The role of non-formal education in empowerment of girls and young women must also be recognized. Through these two avenues, we can empower girls and young women to become the leaders of tomorrow and agents of change. Providing vocational training and income generating skills will allow them to become financially independent.

We address you today not only as girls and young women, but as the decision-makers of tomorrow. Your continuing efforts to improve the status of women, and your dedication towards girls and young women are appreciated. Thank you, Madame Chairperson and Distinguished Delegates for your time.

What Can You Give to a 12 Year-Old?

by Sara Rowbottom, Staff Assistant, Gender, Population Council



“What can you give a twelve year-old girl that no one can take away?” That was the question posed by the Population Council, the UN Population Fund, UNICEF and Equality Now at a February 28th side event during the 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). If the right investments are made to assist girls in negotiating their transition to adulthood safely, we could see dramatic changes in the world’s demographic, health, social, and economic scenarios. However, there are significant challenges

ahead. Twelve year-old girls in developing countries with high rates of child marriage, fertility and HIV/AIDS infection face a multidimensional risk.

Governments are responsible to create strategies which target the vulnerable adolescents, especially girls, who are frequently left out of conventional youth programs and ignored by policy planners. These vulnerable groups include: girls aged 10-14 living without parents; girls at risk of child marriage; girls on their own; girls under pressure to exchange sex for gifts or money; married adolescents; economically disadvantaged families; and families affected by HIV. In many developing countries these groups represent a significant portion of the population. For example, in urban areas of countries such as Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Haiti, Rwanda, and Uganda, over 40% of girls aged 10-14 are living with neither parent.¹ In Ethiopia, 49% of girls are married by age eighteen—80% in the Amhara region.²

Programs are needed that targeted the specific needs of the most vulnerable adolescent girls. For example, young domestic servants who are living without parents need safe spaces, group support, formal or non-formal education, financial literacy training and a program schedule that recognizes their time constraints. Married adolescent girls, who are frequently socially isolated, need a safe space to meet and be with peers and mentors. Economically disadvantaged girls are more likely to be subjected to forced sex³ would benefit from programs which provide livelihood skills, reproductive health information, HIV prevention [cont’d p. 6]

¹ Tabulations by Erica Chong, Population Council, DHS data, 1992-2001.

² Compiled by Erica Chong, Population Council, DHS data, 2000, [data are for 20-24-year-olds](#).

³ Data from South Africa. Hallman, Kelly. “Poverty and Unsafe Sexual Behaviors Among Young Women and Men in South Africa.” Population Council Working Paper 190, 2004.

strategies, and savings and credit opportunities. It is programs and of activities such as these that could make the “twelve year-old moment” a moment empowerment for girls.

Unfortunately, many societies lack plans for adolescents. Indeed a child may see an authority with an interest in his or her well-being infrequently—at the time of immunization, possibly again at school enrollment and, for boys, at the time of national service, and girls at first pregnancy. In too many cases that leaves a gap of as much as eighteen years without any contact with a caring authority. Creating a systematic check-in for every child at age twelve could facilitate the identification of at-risk adolescents and help to ensure that children’s needs are met and their rights protected. The check-in could include a health assessment; issuance of ID cards and training for citizen-

ship. It would be an opportunity to educate young people about their right to a secondary school education, to a free and informed decision to marry at age eighteen, to knowledge of one’s and one’s partner’s HIV status and to the bearing of children at a chosen time. A systematic “check-in” at age twelve could be a real moment of empowerment for girls and, in many cases, may be the last chance to change the trajectory of girls’ lives. Learn more at www.popcouncil.org.

Send us your email address!

Action for Girls is moving to a fully electronic format. We hope this will make the newsletter timelier, more convenient as well as less expensive to publish.

Send your name, organization, country and email address to: wggs@girlsrights.org. Please put “Newsletter” in the subject line.

Mission Statement

The Working Group on Girls (WGG) is dedicated to advancing the rights and status of girls worldwide; empowering them to become independent and self-sufficient “Women of Tomorrow.”

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