

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 2007
“Ending all forms of Violence and Discrimination against the Girl Child”
and
the Mary Purcell Travelship Program for Girls
International Federation of University Women Conference August 2007
by
Linda Hiebert Sekiguchi

The 51st Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) met February 28 –March 9, 2007 in New York City considering the theme, “Ending All Forms of Violence and Discrimination Against the Girl Child”. Governmental officials met to negotiate an outcome document, based on the 2006 Secretary General’s study on violence against the girl child and the report of an expert panel that had met in Florence, Italy last fall. During the two-week session, various thematic caucuses met to formulate changes they wished to suggest for the agreement. Groups then lobbied country missions to accept amendments to the original draft document. In general, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) advocated for stronger language mandating that governments take urgent interventions in behalf of girls. The 45-country Commission discussed potential changes, presented amendments, made compromises, proposed resolutions, and hammered out a final document. These agreed conclusions will be taken back to all the governments and will form the basis for countries drafting appropriate legislation, planning policy changes, and establishing institutions that will deal with their specific issues of concern.

As governmental representatives negotiated an outcome document, high level panels, government-sponsored seminars, and non-governmental organizations coordinated educational presentations about the theme. Each year, the Commission has highlighted one of the critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action. Issues related to the Girl Child are addressed in the 12th (letter L) in the Platform. Approximately fifteen International Federation of University Women (IFUW) official delegate observers attended the meetings. I was privileged to be among them. How saddened I felt as I learned of the kinds of violence and discrimination girls face daily around the world. Expert governmental panels shared data and trends concerning the vulnerability of girls who are subjected to sex trafficking, forced early marriage (and the side effects of obstetric fistula and increased risk of HIV/AIDS), pre-natal sex selection, domestic abuse, female genital mutilation (FGM), poverty, the lack of education, and other injustices that uniquely affect girls.

The Purcell Connection

Mary Purcell served as an IFUW representative to the U.N. in New York City from 1992-2000. As a past president of IFUW, she was approached by the NGO Committee on UNICEF in 1993 to lead a Working Group on Girls (WGG). The UNICEF committee believed that girls present unique challenges for human rights that do not fall under the categories of either women or children. They wished to verify the types of discrimination and detrimental practices that are uniquely faced by girls. As Purcell became familiar with the plight of girls around the world, she became a staunch advocate of the girl child. At the 1995 U.N. Beijing Women’s Conference, she led the NGO lobbying effort for exclusive inclusion of The Girl Child in the Beijing Platform

for Action. The lobbying and advocacy were successful, giving The Girl Child special recognition as a critical area of the Beijing Platform for Action. Purcell continued her efforts and leadership of the NGO Committee on UNICEF Working Group on Girls until her retirement in the year 2000.

In an effort to empower girls through participation, the current Working Group on Girls, now consisting of nearly 100 NGO groups, launched a special subcommittee and project called the "Mary Purcell Grants For Girls Task Force". The group included Dagmar McGill, Chair (VGIF), Catherine Moore IFUW, and representatives from UNANIMA International, League of Women Voters, and The Grail. The group quickly set up its mission to:

- ? Organize a one-time solicitation of funds to help girls to attend and participate in the CSW;
- ? Develop, request and review applications for the grant;
- ? Plan special activity for recipients at CSW51

The Mary Purcell Travelship Program was designed to bring girls from developing countries to New York City for the CSW so that they could speak for themselves. The funds raised were allocated to offer \$1,000 travelships in honor of Mary Purcell's leadership. Strict parameters were set forth for eligibility. Girls had to be chaperoned and sponsored by a recognized U.N. NGO, have sufficient funds for food and lodging in New York, and be involved in their communities.

Mary Purcell Travel Grants were awarded to nine girls from nine countries. who were selected to participate in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Meetings. The girls - 14 to 18 years of age – came from Ethiopia, Ghana, Haiti, India, Kenya, Mozambique, Peru, South Africa, Togo and Uganda. The teenagers were asked to plan a "Back Home Project" and small implementation grants were given to each girl at a special reception in New York City to help raise awareness of discrimination and violence against girls in their home countries.

Joining over 220 girls from around the world registered for the event, there was an active girls' caucus where the girls shared their proposed solutions to the problems of health, attaining a secondary education and developing leadership opportunities. The girls advocated their issues with government representatives and planned to take strategies home to their communities for ending discrimination and violence against girls.

The highlight of the meetings was a Girls' Speak-Out, a panel of girls from around the world who shared candidly of the particular issues they personally have to face. A Nepalese girl spoke of working in a factory and how she must allocate her time and energy between attending school and earning her own living. A disabled girl from Armenia told of how handicapped girls are considered to be of no value as they cannot be married in exchange for dowries, so most are left abandoned in institutions. A Zambian girl shared her daily struggle with treatment for her HIV/AIDS. From the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a girl spoke movingly of having been coerced as a child into joining the soldiers, being forced into sex slavery, escaping, and then not being accepted back into her home community. Often, she stated, girls return to their home communities with babies and/or HIV/AIDS. The girls are ostracized and have nowhere to go.

A young girl from Jordan spoke of working with girls in Palestinian refugee camps. A Thai girl talked about advocating for young victims of trafficking in her country.

Certainly, the Working Group on Girls achieved its goal of making girls visible. Carolyn Donovan, former IFUW representative, assisted in leading the group as Vice Chair. The WGG had planned and organized for the CSW meetings since the girl child theme was announced last March. They worked with UNICEF helping in the conceptualization of a youth report with the suggestions of over 1300 youth as to what governments should do to help girls. They also assisted in developing a program for the NGO representatives which made the commission meeting more relevant and meaningful. For instance, they coordinated with the NGO Committee on the Status of Women to implement the Consultation Day, published "Making Girls Visible", the very helpful guide book to events of the two-week session, and co-sponsored the Girls' Speak-Out, introduced by CBS anchor, Katie Couric. Their efforts to make girls visible were, indeed, realized with the registration of over 220 girls from around the world; the attendance of 80 girls at a half-day girls' orientation; and the meeting of a girls' caucus, averaging about 40, daily. They made presentations of their recommendations to the briefing meeting, and various caucuses, as well as lobbied their governmental officials.

Thanks to the efforts of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women who urged governments to bring girls and opened up their events to girls, as well as to the wide range of programming related to girls of UNICEF's Human Rights and Gender Equality Unit, girls were in the spotlight. The NGOs at the 51st session truly spread their message: "Make Girls Visible."