

A Child of Us All

The newspaper report carried this photo of a naked girl: head bowed, short black hair dishevelled, back to the camera, thin arms twisted at the back tied by a nylon cord that also wound around her neck. Beside the photo ran this story: Philippine judge acquits a Japanese accused of pedophilia for lack of evidence. The girl's lawyers failed to present in court this photo, which the Japanese himself took.

This case is just one of thousands of child sexual abuse cases that have been reported. Many are awaiting or are on trial. In the Philippines alone, there were 2,636 reported cases in 1995 of child physical and sexual abuse and elsewhere, governments say they are alarmed at the rise of sex abuse cases.

The plight of the girl child has been an invisible one for a long time. In many cultures, the unjust treatment of girl children is a perfectly natural part of life. Only recently did the impenetrable and invisible wall that for so long kept the girl child's cries silent crack open, and the voices that came out spoke sad tales of physical and emotional violence.

Indeed, the very fact that sexual abuse and all the other problems besetting the girl child are now being documented is already a major breakthrough in itself. Whereas before people simply were blind to the ways that wronged the girl child, now they acknowledge that something evil is in fact going on.

The greatest proof of this acknowledgement is Section L of the Platform for Action that issued out of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995. For the first time, the women's conference, which has been meeting since 1975, paid attention to the plight of the girl child. Prior to Beijing, other international gatherings—the 1989 United Nations General Assembly that unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development—all included children in their agenda. But only in Beijing was it recognized that not all children are equal, and that it is the girl child who is most often brutalized.

But the most important development is this: Girl children themselves beginning to speak up and organize. At the Beijing conference, 400 girls attended and the

most organized was perhaps the Girls International Forum, an initiative born in the United States.

We are not certain if there is an equivalent organized force of girls in Asia. But even if there is none, this only makes girls who have the grit to stand up alone even more admirable—girls like the one we have here, who perhaps found the courage to do so precisely because she trusted adults to do her justice. This why it is just plain tragic that some of these people—figures all of authority, bigger, stronger, richer—in the end, trashed everything she said, pushed aside her wounded spirit and body and declared innocent her enemy. This brave little girl may now be wondering: Who then is guilty?

This little girl's ordeal, apart from making us seethe, pushes us to act and ensure that governments deliver on the promises they made in Beijing. Even now, some have already started picking up the issue of the girl child with greater force, committing and launching campaigns to protect the rights of the girl child, to raise the rate of enrollment for girls, to reduce infant mortality, to increase child care and many others. All these are good things that, to a very large extent, are fruits of the feminist movement.

Now we are forging on to knock down obstacles that prevent the realization and furtherance of these gains. Foremost among these obstacles are laws and judicial systems, culture and, most especially, poverty. Because where poverty stalks families, there the girl child is most in jeopardy. The coping strategies of families in economic crisis are usually gender-biased and in many instances, families would hang on to possessions—the radio, the television—but would sell their daughters first off.

Which brings us to the question of family. Maybe, it is time we begin to understand family to mean entire communities watching out for children, communities unafraid and ready to intervene and break the cycle of violence against the girl child if and whenever necessary.

This issue of *Women in Action* is dedicated to the girl child. Let every single one be the child of us all.

Ann Mercurio Carreon