

## For the Girl Child

# BEIJING Breaks Ground

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

**T**he sad situation of many girl children was totally invisible in the agenda of the first three world conferences on women that took place in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). While each one tackled important issues confronted by women, none gave attention to the situation of the girl child. In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since then, every UN Conference had to take children into account. This was evident at the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) and the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995).

Finally, at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in September 1995, the girl children around the world finally received the attention long overdue them. The issue of the girl child was at last included on the agenda. In Section L of the Beijing Platform for Action, the blueprint for the advancement of women around the world, the girl child was identified as the 12th critical area of concern.

This development may be credited to non-government organizations and to the United Nations Children's Fund, especially those based in Africa, South Asia and the West. For the past two years, they worked very hard to ensure that the issue of the girl child is incorporated into every section of the Beijing Platform for Action.

### **CONTENTIOUS ISSUES**

But bringing the girl child into the agenda of the Fourth World Conference on Women was not easy. As expected, several issues were contentious during the negotiation process, from the regional preparatory meetings up to the actual conference. These issues included prenatal sex selection, inheritance rights, sexual education and the use of the term family or "families." The last one stems from one of the Platform's earlier provision that says various forms of the family exist in different cultural, political and social systems.

Yet, the agenda agreed to include:

- ◆ The enforcement of steps to ensure that children receive appropriate financial support from their parents by, among other

measures, enforcing child-support laws.

- ◆ The enactment and strict enforcement of laws concerning the minimum legal age for marriage and raising of the minimum age for marriage.

- ◆ The disaggregation by sex and age of all data related to health, education and other areas relevant to planning, implementation and monitoring of programs that will protect the rights of the girl child.

- ◆ The development of formal and informal educational programs that support and enable girls to acquire knowledge, develop self-esteem and take responsibility for their own lives and

- ◆ The development of programs to educate adults, especially parents, on the importance of a girl's physical and mental well-being, including the elimination of discrimination against girls in food allocation, early marriage, child prostitution and female genital mutilation.

Moreover, the Beijing conference is also significant for the fact that, it is the first international meeting that reached an agreement on female genital mutilation. A study conducted in 1994 reveals that more than two million girls undergo genital mutilation each year.

## EDUCATING GIRLS

Educating girls is key because two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are women. In 1993, 81 million of the 130 million children who had no access to primary school were girls. "Closing the Gender Gap: Educating Girls," a study by the Population Action International, shows that in 50 countries there are 76 million fewer girls than boys enrolled in primary and secondary schools. Except for five, these countries are all located in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Moreover, the Beijing Platform includes a commitment to eliminate all barriers that impede the schooling of married or pregnant girls and young women and recommends the provision of affordable and physically accessible child care facilities to help achieve this.

Educating girls is a formidable task. As Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Executive Director, puts it, getting girls into schools is a complex social, political and cultural challenge. It requires building schools closer to home, hiring

more women teachers, creating support systems for parents and convincing them that it is safe and worthwhile to educate their daughters. It also entails the formulation of a non-sexist curricula and the development of teaching materials and textbooks that will improve the self-image of girls. To accomplish this task, it is also necessary to call on educational institutions and the media to adopt and project balanced and non-stereotype images of girls and boys.

If the first step—getting girls into school—is difficult, keeping them there is even harder. In Laos, for example, only five percent of those who enter primary school enter college. In other words, educating girls also means addressing issues such as poverty, health and nutrition, sexual exploitation and teenage pregnancy.

## COMMITMENTS

Worthy of commendation are the commitments made by some governments intending to improve the situation of the girl child.

Cote d'Ivoire is aiming for a 100 percent enrollment rate for girls in primary school by the year 2000.

Mongolia is seeking to reduce infant mortality by 33 percent from 1990 levels by the year 2000.

The United Kingdom wants to increase child care by 20 percent by March 1996.

India will increase its investment in education to six percent of gross domestic product to benefit women and girls.

The World Bank, for its part, announced at the closing plenary that it would spend US\$2 billion over the next five years on education with US\$900 million a year on education for young girls.

However, the commitments came with reservations. Of the 189 countries represented in Beijing, only a few signified that they fully agree to the provisions in the Platform for Action. These countries are Cambodia, India, Bolivia, Colombia, Panama, El Salvador, South Africa, Madagascar, Cameroon and Tanzania.

NGOs would do girls around the world a great service if these commitments were monitored and especially if the monitoring is coupled with other actions to encourage other governments to fully implement the Beijing Platform.

## PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The Platform recognizes that all the efforts put in by the UN, governments, and NGOs into improving the girl child's situation will be futile without the cooperation and support from the parents or guardians. Thus, the Platform takes into account the responsibilities and duties of parents and legal guardians and calls on them to regard "the best interests of the child [as] primary consideration." The child's rights are recognized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.



Teaching girls to read and write is a key task. Two-thirds of the world's illiterate are women.

## GIRLS INTERNATIONAL FORUM

In Beijing, one of the few organized voices of girls was that of the Girls International Forum (GIF), an initiative of *New Moon*, a magazine for young girls published in the United States. Prior to and during the actual Beijing conference, GIF gathered feedback from young girls around the world to define the girls' agenda. Using the pages of *New Moon*, the Internet and actual interviews, GIF asked girls around the world what they thought are girls' biggest problem and greatest strengths and what girls' issues should be discussed at the Conference. GIF also asked girls how they think they can make things better for themselves and how adults can make things better for them.

The answers represent the whole gamut of women's issues. It touched on health, violence against women, shared parenting, children's rights, education, political participation and sexuality. Most of these issues are already part of the Beijing Platform for Action but one major exception is the often repeated concern that adults need to listen to girls and take them seriously.

For this reason, *New Moon* and GIF took 13 girls to the conference. The girls had the opportunity to listen and be heard through the Platform Committee set up at the NGO Forum Youth Tent. Recommendations on specific changes to the Beijing Platform were put forth by the girls and submitted to Janie Munoz, the official UN Youth delegate from the US, who in turn took the suggestions to the official UN Conference.

Moreover, some members of the GIF delegation were also able

to attend the official UN Conference and witnessed how government delegates deliberated on the final language of the Platform. They also took part in the Youth March and met other girls from other countries. It is interesting to note that all the GIF girls are planning to attend the Fifth World Conference on Women and to take other girls with them. Disappointed with the small turn out of girls in the Beijing Conference—400 girls out of

formulated and presented a Youth Vision Statement that sees "a future that will be free of today's problems. A future where every girl and young woman will have access and a right to education free of discrimination. A future where all women, young and old, will have full access to health care, related information and complete control of their bodies. A future where women and men will share equally in the sense of ownership of the achievements of their countries.

Also a future where women can actively participate in determining a New World order free from armed conflict and guided by the principles upheld in the Culture of Peace. A future where a commitment to the preservation of our natural environment is reflected in all our international, national and local development

plans. A future where work done by women is recognized as an indispensable contribution to the world's economic growth.

"And in this vision, we foresee a Fifth World Conference on Women where the world will gather to celebrate the equality, development and peace achieved from actions agreed upon at this Conference." )

*Mavic Cabrera-Balleza is a Communications Program Associate at Isis International-Manila.*

The Beijing conference is the first international meeting that reached an agreement on female genital mutilation.

30,000 participants—they vowed to ensure a bigger participation of girls in the next global women's conference.

In the end, what happens beyond Beijing is what really matters. Words do not effect change. Actions do and *New Moon* and GIF suggest you:

- ◆ Write to your elected officials to tell them how important beneficial changes for women and girls are to you;
- ◆ Work with your friends and adults to find ways to make changes happen now in your community;
- ◆ Tell your friends about what happened in China and think of new ways to make changes in your life; and
- ◆ Learn about girls' lives in other countries and help other people learn about them.

### YOUTH VISION STATEMENT

On the final day of the Beijing Conference, youth delegates