



Since Beijing

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Research tells us that a major outcome of girls' development during the early adolescent years is a loss of connection with themselves, their experiences and their own voices (Gilligan et al, 1990). Furthermore, the groundbreaking study commissioned by the American Association of University Women, "Shortchanging Girls" (1992), documented the presence of systemic gender bias in American education. This report summarized years of research demonstrating how often unwittingly, the education system inhibits, restricts, diminishes and denies girls' experience. (Orrstein, 1994, p xxiii). From a resilience perspective, girls are denied the powerful protective factors of high expectations and opportunities to contribute and participate.

The following article, written by adolescent girls themselves, describes what can happen when girls are given the opportunity to be heard, to participate and to contribute. All that is needed is for adults, teachers, parents, mentors, etc, to create a place, a space, and a forum where girls are listened to.

Nancy Gruver, parent, ally and publisher of New Moon: The Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams, is one adult who has done just this. According to Nancy, "The work of adults to make things different (and better) for girls consists almost entirely of listening to girls and their voices and then taking the action we can as adults to make change. This can be an uncomfortable thing to do, accustomed as we are to dismissing girls' feelings, concerns, dreams, and opinions as childish. However, it can also be a marvelous thing with wonderful results, as the girls tell us." (Inscheffer, 1995, p. viiix.)

-Bonnie Benard

As we write this article we realize that it was exactly one year ago today that we were arriving in Huairou to attend the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. Our group, Girls International Forum, brought thirteen girls (aged 10-17) and eight adults to China for the NGO Forum and the Governmental Conference. We were inspired to go to the conference when we met Angela Davis and heard her talk about her amazing experiences at the 1985 Women's Conference in Nairobi. That was in March, 1994. By the summer of '94, a group of girl editors of New Moon: The Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams, was meeting to learn about the conference and brainstorm about ways to raise money for the trip.

We found out that very few girls had ever been at any of the UN Conferences on Women. There had never been any organized workshops involving girls, either. When we talked to people about going to the conference many of them couldn't understand why girls would want to go. They thought we would be bored with the workshops and the work on the Platform for Action. They thought we would expect to be "entertained" and not really be willing to work! This was even though "The Girl Child" was one of the important parts of the Platform.



We also think that girls themselves can help change the world, but only if we are part of the groups (like the NGO Forum) that are working on the problems. We need to be treated like real people with good ideas, just like adults are.

These attitudes made us even more determined to go to the conference and speak up for girls. And, of course, there were also people who encouraged us to go and thought it made a lot of sense for girls to talk with women about girls' issues, rather than just women talking with women about girls. We made "Listen To Girls" our theme because we think it's the first thing that has to happen to make girls' lives better. Most girls aren't really listened to and taken seriously by adults, even adults who are trying to help them! We wanted to go to the conference so the people there would hear from some actual girls and not just be assuming they know what girls need and want. We also think that girls themselves can help change the world, but only if we are part of the groups (like the NGO Forum) that are working on the problems. We need to be treated like real people with good ideas, just like adults are.

Over the next fifteen months, the seven New Moon editors and our parents and friends created a separate organization called Girls International Forum. We raised a total of \$60,000 by selling "Listen To Girls" T-shirts and getting donations from individuals, corporations and foundations. In April, 1995, we received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation so we could also bring girls

from other parts of the U.S. along to the conference. So, in the end, girls from Minnesota, Maryland, Washington, New York and Arizona were all part of our group.

It's hard to believe that a whole year has passed since then. Even though the conference is over, we've still been working on the goals of the conference. The Girl Child was one of the 12 parts of the Platform for Action, the official result of the UN Governmental Conference. Goals for the Girl Child include educating girls about social, economic and political issues and strengthening the role of the family in improving the status of girls. These are two parts of the Platform for Action that we are working on the most. Girls International Forum is working to educate girls about girls' issues and what we can do about them in our own communities.

We've learned a lot from our experiences in China. We've also shared our experiences with others in an effort to spread the word about the conference. A big part of going to the conference for us has been telling everyone else about it. We give presentations to school groups, women's groups, and at various conferences. To prepare for those talks we had to go through all of our photographs to make slides. Just about everybody in our group took photographs so we had a great many pictures to sort through. We developed a number of different slide shows which we then took around to our various presentations. In our presentations we show slides and talk about our experiences in China. By giving presentations we help people to understand the Platform for Action and what went on at the conference. It is a chance for us to let people know what we've done. People ask us many questions about the trip—from how old are you to whether or not we liked it and what we have learned from our experiences. After our presentations, people have a better understanding of the importance of girls issues.

One way that we help spread the word is through articles in New Moon magazine. We wrote articles about the activities we did and the people we met in China. Even though there were only about 400 girls at the conference, we met girls from many countries: Australia, Jamaica, Philippines, Germany, Nigeria, Egypt, Malaysia, and Macedonia. One of the exciting things that happened while we were there was connecting with a group of young women from Israel called "Nisan-Young Women Leaders." These young women had tried to write us before we left for China, but we did not get the message. It was pure luck that we ran into them while we were there.

We wrote about these meetings and we also wrote about the goals of the conference and some of the outcomes. By writing articles in New Moon we have reached many more girls around the world. We want girls to know what happened at the conference. We all learned so much about girls' lives in other countries and all the things we share in common. The conference opened our eyes to issues of women and girls around the world, discrimination and abuse. Now, we think much more about what happens to girls in other countries, not just us. It made us realize that we are very privileged, but, at the same time there is so much to be improved in the US, also. We came back feeling connected to girls and women other places, even when our lives are very different. We want girls everywhere to feel that they are important and can get involved in making the world a better place.

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Another project that we have worked on since the conference is an educational curriculum for the boys and girls in the state of Minnesota. The purpose of the curriculum is to include the lives of children around the world in everyday learning in school. It's based on the issue areas of the Platform for Action. The curriculum will help make learning interesting by having kids actually do things instead of just reading and memorizing. Our theme, "A Day in the Life" puts the focus on children's everyday lives and the similarities and differences between them. It's a good way to learn about global issues and concerns. We hope the curriculum will motivate kids to do things to help other kids, too. We are using our experiences and the things we've learned as a basis for the curriculum. It will be published in the summer of 1997.

In January of this year, three members of our group, including two girls, Sarah Vokes and Nia Kelly, were invited to participate in a meeting of the Women's Conference Circle in Washington, D.C. The Conference Circle is a nationwide group focusing on the progress of the conference goals in the United States. It's unusual that two girls were invited to a meeting that would have otherwise been mostly adults, but that's one of the positive things that came out of girls being at the conference in China.

Another major conference we were part of this year was Children First: A Global Forum, with 350 participants from 66 countries, who met at The Carter Center in Atlanta. The goal of the Forum was to: ". . .build a new model of how to create change and improve the lives of children around the world." In the past, these kinds of meetings were "adults-only" without any actual children present. This was the first year that kids were directly involved in the conference. Mavis Gruver and Nia Kelly were two of 47 girls and boys from 23 countries who were active participants. Meeting in caucuses of about 20 people each (with one or two kids in each caucus), the Forum used consensus to come up with "The Promise of Atlanta":

We, as representatives of the global community, make the following promise with the children of today and for the children of tomorrow: By the year 2000, measurably more children will be wanted, healthy, safe, educated, empowered and loved.

As a result of people they met in Atlanta, Nia & Mavis were then invited to an International Youth Summit held this summer in Costa Rica. The summit focused on children's rights and had 40 youth participants from 20 countries. The Summit was organized by a Costa Rican girl, Laura Ramirez, who is part of an international group called Peaceways. The purpose was to get kids to organize and hold their governments accountable for living up to the promises in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Also, the group wants the UN to establish a permanent Youth General Assembly so children's voices will always be heard at the UN.

After the Summit, all the participants were going back home to get other kids involved in working on these issues. For their part, Mavis and Nia are astonished that the United States is one of only a few countries worldwide which has not yet ratified the Rights of the Child. They will be working to educate other Americans and lobby Congress about this appalling fact. In addition, they will work for the establishment of a Children's Council in every state and federally. The Children's Councils will be made up completely of kids and will advise the state and federal governments on children's issues.

As a follow-up to girls being at the Beijing conference, the first National Girls Conference in the US is going to be held January 3 & 4, 1997 at the United Nations. This conference is being planned by girls around the nation (including three of our girls who went to China). It will be attended by girls from all 50 states. It will give girls a chance to interact with each other, and not just be talked to by adults. We hope this conference will be the beginning of a National Girls Movement. The conference will focus on three issues that girls have picked as most important to them: violence, media and human rights. We hope it will bring girls together and energize us to work with each other, feel powerful and change the world into what we want it to be.

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We're also involved in other more direct follow-ups to Beijing. In early September, a state wide conference will be held in Minnesota to build on the experiences Minnesotans had in Beijing. The conference will include people who did not attend the NGO Forum as well as those who did. This conference is also going to have girls playing an important role, including girls leading workshops and discussions. Then, at the end of September, we will join women from around the country in the National Satellite conference to discuss what has happened since the Beijing conference, and, we hope, what more we can do to realize some of the goals which have not yet been met. We are inviting women and girls from around our community to participate in this conference so that they can share in the experience of the conference and see how they can be part of the post-conference work.

On a more personal level, we have noticed that many other positive changes have occurred in the people around us as a result of our trip to Beijing and the Fourth World Conference. Lauren's grandmother proudly told her about an unplanned presentation she made to a group she belongs to. A woman who had been scheduled to give a presentation on the conference was unable to do so and Lauren's grandma Jean was able to fill in on the spot with the scrapbook she had kept on Lauren's trip. She had followed Lauren's progress while in China and had remembered talking with Lauren and her mom about why they wanted to go on the trip. Grandma Jean knew about many of the issues that had been discussed and the goals which emerged from the conference because Lauren was there.

Another one of our participants, Katie Lopez, also influenced a grandparent. Before Beijing, Katie's grandpa Pat was not exactly a supporter of Women's Rights. But, while Katie was away, he was silently and diligently keeping clippings and records of Katie's experiences. When Katie returned home, Grandpa Pat surprised everyone by presenting her with a lovingly produced scrapbook of his American memories of Katie's Chinese adventure.

Katie also had an unforeseen impact on her school. Katie attends a Catholic school in her hometown of Tucson, Arizona. When she returned from Beijing she was excited to share her experiences and newfound knowledge. She was invited to talk to a few classes and community groups, and she willingly shared her perspectives whenever someone asked her questions. Apparently, her enthusiasm was contagious. At one point in the fall, one of the teachers approached Katie's mom to say that Katie should now stop talking about the trip because the boys in Katie's class were beginning to feel uncomfortable with the ideas Katie had been sharing.

All of the girls and women who attended the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing were changed in ways we are still learning about. We look at the world through different eyes. We also recognize that the central message we took with us to Beijing—that people should Listen to Girls—remains an important one. More people are listening to girls, but some people still haven't gotten the message. We have a lot more work to do. We need to make sure that our voices are heard in the United States and around the world. Girls have important things to say and perspectives to share. If we are going to be the leaders of tomorrow, what better time to get started than now in the present.

Featured in media reports worldwide, New Moon (27,000 circ.) is the only international, ad-free bimonthly magazine edited by and for 8 to 14-year-old girls. The Parent's Choice Foundation named New Moon the best children's magazine in 1995. To subscribe, call 1-800-381-4743-or write to PO Box 3620, Duluth, MN 55803-3620. Check out the home page at: <http://www.newmoon.org> .

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