

Action for Girls

Newsletter of the NGO Committee on UNICEF Working Group on Girls (WGG) and its International Network for Girls (INFG).

WGG Helps Highlight Problem of Early Marriage: Active & Visible in Paris

Research indicates that one in seven girls in the developing world will marry before they reach their fifteenth birthday. The consequences for these girls are devastating and include the denial of education, her right to health and social-psycho development, and the right to choose a spouse.

The International Federation of University Women (IFUW) agreed to sponsor the screening of "Child Brides: Stolen Lives" at the UN Department of Public Information/NGO Conference "Reaffirming Human Rights for All"; the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) joined as co-sponsors. The event proposal stated: "Girls' right to life, liberty and

security enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights continues to be violated with impunity. Using the unprecedented inside look, provided by the American Public Broadcasting System's CHILD BRIDES: STOLEN LIVES, this workshop will explore the fundamental violation of girls' rights in the global custom of child marriages and examine replicable community-based strategies to delay or end early marriage. Sustainable success requires the support of civil society everywhere."

Speakers included Jacqueline de Chollet, founder of VEERNI - Rajasthan, India; Ann Scholz, SSND, and Catherine Moore, IFUW. The ICRW organizers invited and supported Bintou Soumaoro, a young activist and national of Mali. Bintou was not present because she was denied a visa.

The questions were dynamic, insightful, and demonstrated a high level of interest. A quotation from the Veerni Report is telling, "...by educating these girls, we are delaying the age of marriage."

Child marriage is a global issue that touches on themes of personal freedom, discrimination, life opportunities, and gender violence – all fundamental human rights concerns. It is an abuse of basic human rights that crosses national boundaries, class lines, and ethnic groups. The sponsors felt compelled to introduce this topic, and invite many to stand up and speak out against child brides.

Ann Scholz concluded that despite prohibitions it remains the fate of far too many. A coalition of UN agencies, national governments, and NGOs committed to empowering girls and building the political will is necessary to end this dreadful practice and ensure girls their rights.

**We invite your involvement.
Are you willing to become active and visible?**

Catherine E. Moore
--International Federation of University Women



Mamta - "Child Brides: Stolen Lives"
Courtesy of NOW on PBS



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Education and Early Marriage: Mali

Bintou Soumaoro was scheduled to speak in September 2008 at the Department of Public Information (DPI)/NGO Conference, Reaffirming Human Rights for All: 60 Years of the Universal Declaration in Paris. Unfortunately she was unable to obtain a visa. The following is taken from her prepared speech.

Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states, "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

In Mali 65% of girls under the age of 18 are married, preventing them from attending school. Seventy-nine percent of girls who are sent to school do not finish elementary school. Additionally, only 16 percent of girls under the age of 15 are literate. Two girls out of 100 attend university.

During the course of one of my trips to Ouologo, I made the acquaintance of a 13-year-old girl whose parents had removed her from school to marry her off. She was the second wife, became pregnant, was unable to deliver, and had a caesarian. The infant did not survive.

Child marriage, also called "forced or arranged marriage" of girls under eighteen, is a practice that dangerously affects the livelihood of young girls. In addition to preventing girls from continuing their studies, child marriage affects their physical development and their ability to bear children safely. Our parents do not think anything is bad about child marriage, but they are beginning to understand that it must change.

At N'Tjilla the parents of girls that we send to school tell us "we send our girls to school so that they can have better lives, we think that an educated girl is more profitable for her family and her village. The girls who are enrolled in school bring support to their parents, help manage the family budget, environment and health." It is necessary, therefore, to work with those in the village who are responsible for keeping girls in school.

I study at the university in Bamako and fight so that all my sisters are able to go to school, not only in Mali but throughout the world because we know that educating girls is one of the best means to eradicate poverty. With my colleagues at Filles Unies pour l'Education, we broadcast radio ads to ask parents and school leaders to send girls to school. In Mali the radio is the best method to spread the word about educating girls.

This is why we want to produce, with the help of the girls of Bamako and other cities in Mali, radio programs and ads on the problems of child marriage and the necessity of girls' education. It is critical that the Malian girls are heard! We propose that you share your ideas with us on our web site: <http://www.schoolgirlsunite.org>.

Bintou Soumaoro, Bamako, Mali
-- President, Filles Unies pour l'Education

*from Jacqueline de Chollet,
founder of VEERNI - Rajasthan, India*

I wish to thank the NGO Committee on UNICEF Working Group on Girls and the International Federation of University Women for inviting me to participate in the panel discussion following the screening of the film "Child Brides - Stolen Lives" in Paris. It was an honour to be able to share our work at the Veerni Project in Rajasthan, India and to talk about issues that are close to my heart, issues that concern young girls in the developing world. These young girls need all our support and activism to ensure that they can exercise their human rights: The right not to be forced into marriages against their will; the right to make choices, to study and have a career; the right to health care that will make motherhood safe for them; and the right to enjoy productive lives and achieve economic independence. Education through secondary school is essential to make this happen. With education, girls will be the agents of a social transformation that will benefit the whole of society. Girls have the courage, the determination and the brilliance to make this a reality. We need everyone's help and activism to ensure that the international agenda reflects their concerns.

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ICRW Making Girls Count: Prioritize an End to Child Marriage

Worldwide, some 60 million girls enter into marriage before their 18th birthday, which compromises their human rights, health, education, and economic futures. While the response of the international community has been slow and halting, growing public awareness of the issue combined with policy, political will, and civil society activism can make a real difference in stopping early marriage.



Jeffries Foale, CP
Passionists International

Numerous human rights instruments and U.N. reports and resolutions uphold the right to marry with one's free and full consent. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) all recognize this basic right. The bodies that monitor CRC and CEDAW request that governments legally establish 18 as the minimum age of marriage. As recently as 2007, the Commission on the Status of Women passed a resolution calling for much greater action to combat child marriage.

Consequently, many nations, including those with high rates of child marriage, have adopted laws that prohibit marriage before 18. Still, governments often lack the capacity and political will to enforce these laws. Some governments hesitate to address an issue so deeply entrenched in culture.

One reason why the international community does not prioritize child marriage might be that adolescent girls seem to occupy the invisible space between the CRC and CEDAW: not girls, but not yet women. To bridge this gap, official committees that monitor the compliance of states with CRC and CEDAW should step up their attention to child marriage.

Nongovernmental watchdog committees also should exert pressure on states to comply.

National and international bodies have reservations about addressing cultural norms as well, particularly around marriage and sexuality. Such issues are difficult to address, but not impossible. The ICRW's research found that in many communities, families want better futures for their daughters though opportunities remain scarce. Interventions that reach out to parents, community leaders, and national policy-makers to create alternatives for adolescent girls can have a lasting impact in raising the age at marriage. As the campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM) demonstrates, the health and human rights of girls can gain traction among governments, the international community, women's organizations, and health providers. With organized efforts at local, national, and international levels, the child marriage movement could achieve similar success.

Kathy Selvaggio
Dan Martin

-- International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

<http://www.icrw.org/childmarriage>

The next meeting of the **Commission on the Status of Women** will take place 2-13 March 2009. To prepare read the paper submitted by the WGG for the Expert Group Meeting on the priority theme, *"Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care giving, in the context of HIV/AIDS,"* which may be found at http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/equalsharing/egm_equalsharing.htm.

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WGG Member groups Show “Child Brides: Stolen Lives” Worldwide

In an hour-long special report, NOW on PBS, an educational television network, took an unprecedented inside look at the global custom of child marriage that devastates girls' lives and holds back communities. With funding from the Nike Foundation, “Child Brides: Stolen Lives” marked the first time the subject has been documented in a primetime television newsmagazine. One of the goals of the film was to raise awareness of the extent of the problem of child marriage and to inspire viewers to take action.



Rosa - “Child Brides: Stolen Lives”
Courtesy of NOW on PBS

In conducting an outreach campaign funded by the United Nations Population Fund and the UN Foundation, NOW on PBS has found an enthusiastic partner in the Working Group on Girls. Member organizations have held dozens of screenings around the United States and across the world highlighting the issue of child marriage and introducing possible solutions.

UN Observer Doris Schapira coordinated a screening at the League of Women Voters of the US (LWV) Convention in Oregon in June 2008. Schapira reports that “Some viewers at the LWV program said that they were not even aware of the issues raised.”

On behalf of the Working Group on Girls, Catherine Moore of the International Federation of University Women and Ann Scholz of the School Sisters of Notre Dame showed the film at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, at the Department of Public Information/NGO 61st Annual Conference, “Reaffirming Human Rights for All: The Universal

Declaration at 60.” Moore reports that the film “clearly engendered interest among the NGO audience many of whom are in a position to act.”

In New York, Girls Learn International, Inc. hosted a screening at Trinity School in Manhattan while GLI Chapters in schools across the metro state have shown and discussed the film. Baldwin School student Nadia Tareen reports that “the screening was an insightful experience. I’m glad the Baldwin chapter had the chance to participate and work for this great cause.”

Meanwhile, Lauren Vater of the Dominican Leadership Conference has shown the film for various school and Peace and Justice Groups. Sister Rose Bernadette Gallagher and Eileen Brady have coordinated a number of screenings for Maryknoll Sisters as part of a Mission Awareness Program at colleges in the Westchester County Area. Maryknoll Sister Mary Vertucci at the Emusoi Center in Arusha, Tanzania, will also show the film.

Mary Kay Louchart of The Grail International screened the film to a girls group in the Bronx and is working with international representatives to show the film in over 16 countries. This fall, Mary Jo Toll of the Sisters of Notre Dame is working with their global network to have the documentary shown and discussed in over 15 countries.

Jill Marie Sen, Physician Associate and NGO Representative at the United Nations for International Catholic Association for Girls, is coordinating film discussions at her NGO’s safe-houses for girls escaping dangerous situations in 26 countries.

Susan O’Malley, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, showed “Child Brides” at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York, under the auspices of Women’s Studies.

NGOs within the WGG’s worldwide network continue to request the film and devise new ways of using the documentary in the global campaign for girls’ human rights. NOW on PBS is thrilled with the WGG’s response to the film, and is in the planning stages of a global outreach initiative.

Alexandra Cosima Budabin
-- NOW on PBS

Important WGG Focus: Institutionalization of Girls' Rights

The institutionalization of girls' rights means placing girls' lives and concerns at the forefront of all analysis, discussion, and development of agendas and policies which affect girls. By institutionalizing girls' rights, we identify girls as a critical mass with unique needs and concerns that deserve specified and concentrated attention

The institutionalization of girls' rights as human rights is critical to the empowerment of girls and the development of effective policies that promote girls' visibility and sustainable change for girls at the local, national, and international level. And yet despite this accepted reality, girls' rights and concerns remain invisible within some of the most important and influential human rights documents. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) maintains equality through the language of the adult male as norm, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) focuses specifically on woman and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is gender neutral. Even the

United Nations 4th World Conference on Women, in Beijing dedicated only one section (L) of the outcome document to girls' issues.

When and if girls are mentioned in international policies, they are frequently addressed as supplemental components of the women's rights and children's rights agenda and systematically denied the ability to inform, challenge, or strengthen the policies and agendas that directly impact their lives. Building coalitions between NGOs, academics, and civil society is mandatory.

Recently, WGG Co-chairs Fulya Vekiloglu and Hourig Babikian presented current information on the international efforts on behalf of girls within the United Nations and discussed the need for alliance building among key stakeholders in the institutionalization of girls' rights at the Girls' Conference sponsored by Women's Studies at the Southern Connecticut State University.

Emily Bent
-- Girls Learn International, Inc.

Magnificent Donation kicks off our year.....

The working Group on Girls would like to thank Jayne Stevlingson, founder and president of the JMS Foundation for Children, for her very generous gift. What an energizing way to begin our year and to promote our many goals.

Ms. Stevlingson grew up in Wisconsin and Ohio and graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She worked on Wall Street for 20 years and funded the foundation in 1999. Jayne left Wall Street, adopted two Russian babies, decided to become a healer via the study of herbs, and is finishing her Masters in Herbal Medicine. Jayne told me that her aim is to open a free clinic in the Philadelphia area for "people to use what nature gave them and not what "man has made."

I asked Jayne why she founded this foundation and she said, "When people do well they should give back especially to children who do not have a voice of their own. She also said that female children need the most help and that women, the backbone of life and caretakers to the world, deserve to be taken care of when there is a need.

Thank you Ms. Stevlingson for your support.

Eleanor Schlesinger
--Pan Pacific & SE Asia Women's Association
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Jayne Stevlingson and WGG Member Eleanor Schlesinger

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Update on Rima Salah

This year our dear friend and colleague Dr. Rima Salah was appointed as Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) for the UN Mission in Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR). She is responsible for the coordination and implementation of UN

camp security, conducts field visits, and provides input for the reports of the SG. In her role, she faces an unstable political situation, working within a limited humanitarian space due to volatile security conditions, a lack of expert human resources, limited infrastructure, adverse climatic conditions for operations, and rampant human rights violations in a culture of impunity.

We applaud the crucial work that Rima Salah is engaged in on behalf of her dedication to securing peace and human rights in Chad and CAR, and wish her the greatest success in her remarkable endeavours.

- Jill Marie Sen
International Catholic Association for Girls



Mission activities regarding political and civil affairs, humanitarian assistance, human rights, the judicial system and prisons, gender and HIV/AIDS, children in armed conflict, camp militarization, sexual and gender-based violence, the safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and reconciliation.

As DSRSG, Rima has developed excellent and productive working relations with government

officials, the diplomatic community, civil society, and staff. Rima coordinates with liaisons and supervises UN Mission issues, advises enforcement of refugee

Dr. Rima Salah is in Abeche in Eastern Chad.
commons.wikimedia.org

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- Carolyn Donovan -- American Association of University Women
- Susan O'Malley -- International Federation of Business and Professional Women
- Mary Ann Strain -- Passionists International

Please address questions about the articles to the authors at wgs@girlsrights.org. Reprinting of articles is encouraged with credit given to *Action for Girls*. We welcome articles by NGOs.