



***'Implementing Women and Girl's Circles:
A tool to vitalize progress with the Millennium Development Goals.'***

**Hardin Room, Church Center, 777 United Nations Plaza, corner of 44th Street and 1st Avenue
Thursday, March 13, 10:30 am.**

Circle experience and tools for taking home & Celebration of Women and Girls

*Panelist: Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen, Dr. Anele Heiges, Dr. Pam Rajput, Julia --Working Group on Girls.
Circle discussion for individuals to share with each other their progress, problems and solutions.*

*Sponsored by Earth Child Institute, International Public Policy Institute,
Women's World Summit Foundation, Millionth Circle, Circle Connections, We Are Enough,
Gather The Women, Working Group on Girls, Women of Spirit and Faith.*

Julia's presentation at parallel event:

I'm a girl advocate, and I want to share my passion with you. It's hard, though, to know just how to do that. Working on a speech for this panel, I went through several drafts where I just talked about myself, how I became part of organizations like the Working Group on Girls and Girls Learn International. I wrote about how important it is to involve girls in every conversation and why girls can change the world. All those drafts ended up in the trash. It felt wrong, first of all because it's stuff that you all, by virtue of being here, already know too well, and also because it just felt awkward for me to be talking only about myself. So I went back to basics and here I stand in front of you now with no pretense, only a story. It feels vulnerable but also so, so right. This is what I really do as a girl advocate - I take the stories of girls I love and I give them voice. My own journey is secondary, accruing value only when weaved together with someone else's, part of the circle. So today I join to the circle a Bangladeshi girl named Noor, who cannot be with us today.

Noor was my host sister while I lived in Bangladesh for a month on a government-sponsored exchange program. She is a feisty, incredibly articulate eighth-grader, and she knows how to make an impression! The first time I met her was when she came with her mother to pick me up from the airport. Her driver refused to shake my hand because I was a girl, and she browbeat him for twenty full minutes until he reluctantly extended his hand to me. By then, I was pretty

intimidated by her too, and I asked Noor why she was so angry. “You’re a foreigner! You shouldn’t have to be treated like that!” she replied indignantly. But I had known that I would face some new gender-specific customs in Bangladesh, like having to cover myself completely and never touch males, and I had decided to accept these things as part of the culture. So I reassured Noor over and over again that I was fine with just blending in, that she didn’t have to fight my battles for me, until she finally shrugged, covered her face with her hands, all of a sudden so fragile and vulnerable, and softly said, “But fighting for you is the only way of fighting for me.” Of course, I was touched, but in that moment I couldn’t really understand the full intensity of her emotion.

It made a lot more sense once Noor and I started confiding in each other. She told me about the sexism she faced even from her own parents, and how their belief that she was fragile made her deliberately adopt masculine behavior. She told me that she was set on learning to drive, which was very unusual for women, and that she didn’t even want to marry, which was unheard of in Bangladesh. As Noor’s true self emerged, I quickly learned that the only thing she considered a compliment was to say, “You’re so manly,” or “You’re like a man.” When she began using these phrases towards me, I never really knew what to say in reply. But I realized something was fundamentally wrong with it when she became sick and hid her illness from everyone because, as she told me later, she wanted to be “tough,” and not be seen as a “delicate girl.”

Then something happened that completely changed my relationship with Noor and her country. While we were living on a boat for a week as part of our program, the captain of the boat began flirting with me. He kept appearing next to me, took inappropriate photos, and made highly inappropriate and even racist comments about my sexuality. On a rafting trip one early morning he sat down next to me, began stroking me and leaning in too close, and told me to come to his room at 10 o’clock that night. “By yourself,” he emphasized. “I need help with something on the computer.” Obviously, I didn’t go, and when the next day he made a fuss about having waited for me all night, I went to my teacher for help and we got the man evicted from his own boat. This experience is unbelievably trivial compared to what the other girls on this panel have faced, but for me it was a crucial moment of discovery because I felt vulnerable in a way that I had never felt before. I’ll never forget my feeling of being hunted the day before I talked to my teacher - how I was constantly turning around to make sure I knew exactly where he was, clinging to my friends and even dragging them to the bathroom with me. All of a sudden I had an insight into some of the vulnerabilities that are inherent in the female experience, especially in places where women are still less free. I think that every girl, sooner or later, has a moment when she realizes that - that she must always be a little insecure, a little anxious on account of her sex.

The more Noor and I discovered together the deep hardships of poor women in Bangladesh, the more I realized how fundamentally different we were. We saw the same things, but I always took away a measure of hope - for example, at the ways in which green initiatives also worked to empower women. But Noor left every experience with a bitter taste in her mouth - the taste of girls’ self-sacrifice for the family, the taste of oppression by husbands and fathers and sons, the taste of abuse. I watched Noor get angrier and angrier, not at men, but at women for “allowing” themselves to be victimized. There was nothing I could say any longer to make her believe there was anything good about being a girl.

I will never be able to forget the image of Noor on the last day of our program, when the bus pulled away to take all the Americans to the airport. Noor stood with her arms crossed, crying, but painfully refusing to recognize her tears, trying to be tough and alone while everyone else around her, boys included, hugged each other for comfort. The last thing Noor said to me was, “you’re a man!” and I knew she said it as the greatest compliment she could give. I knew she wanted me to reciprocate. But I couldn’t bring myself to say it because by then I’d realized how wrong it was. Instead I said, “you’re beautiful, and smart... and a brave young woman.” Her face fell. It wasn’t enough for her. But I didn’t give her more. I owe her more than that.

That’s why I’m here today. Because I owe it to Noor to fight for a world free from the damaging trappings of “masculinity.” I became a feminist because Noor is unfairly being forced to fight gender inequalities on her own and the feminist movement provides a network and role models for girls like her. I speak out at the UN because I realize how culture and tradition can be used as excuses for oppression, and that I was wrong to so easily capitulate to sexist customs. When I do that, or when other travelers do that, we detract from the ability of girls and women who have grown up in those norms to fight against them. Noor was right: fighting for someone else is the only way of fighting for ourselves. That’s what it means to be a girl advocate - what makes a girl a girl advocate is not what organizations she is officially part of, but how she puts others’ stories first and gives voice to those who are unheard.

I’m not going to prescribe ways to involve girls in advocacy; take what you will from what I’ve said. I’m rejoining your circle now, as an equal, and it was never my purpose to tell you what to do, because each of you can judge best how to bring the girls around you into your circle. I just want to share what lies inside my heart, and I speak out into the center this dream: that one day, when I return to Bangladesh and find Noor again, I’ll clasp her to my heart and tell her once more the only truth I know, “you’re a strong woman, Noor,” and she’ll smile and say, “yes, of course, and that’s more than enough.”

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