

# Action for Girls

Newsletter of the Working Group on Girls (WGG) and its International Network for Girls (INfG).

## The Working Group on Girls is Founded

I was aware that UNICEF had begun to focus on girls when I found a small booklet called “The Girl Child”, written by A. Aidoo, a UNICEF staff member, while attending a meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women” (CSW) in Vienna in the early nineties. My organization, The American Association of University Women (AAUW), had just published studies about girls entitled, “Short Changing Girls, Short Changing America”. I was also involved in planning for AAUW’s participation in the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

In early 1993 I was surprised when I received a call from a UNICEF staff member saying UNICEF wanted to start a “working group for girls” and would I consider chairing the group. “But I live in PA not in NYC”, I protested. “If we find a co-chair in NYC,” she asked, “will you come on board?” I found myself saying “yes”, never dreaming what lay ahead. My co-chair was Kate Katzki, a brilliant woman, who became my colleague and dear friend. Together we called a meeting to announce the formation of WGG and were amazed at the turnout. In a short time we had over 80 NGO reps in both the U.S. and Geneva.

Our goal became to make the plight of girls visible in the Platform for Action to be adopted in Beijing in August 1995. The proposed Platform was available prior to the meeting of the CSW in February 1995 where it was hoped there would be agreement on the eleven sections. Whatever could not be agreed on in February would go to Beijing “in brackets” for review and approval. WGG was conservative in its approach: we agreed we only needed to insert the word “girls” after “women”.

We were not prepared for the turnaround, which took place in November. In 1994 there were regional meetings to review the document. In Dakar, African women insisted that the



WGG Tribute to Mary Powell on left

J. Gilberto-Brady, Sisters of Notre Dame

problems of girls were unique and needed a separate section in the document. After that meeting, UNICEF brought several of the African women to New York to discuss this new issue to separate girls’ from women’s issues. Kate and I were invited to join the meeting. Almost immediately we realized that WGG had been too conservative in its approach, and we declared we were prepared to support a separate section on “the Girl Child” at the CSW meeting in February 1995 in NYC. The tough question that had to be answered was which UN member delegation would write the proposal and put it on the floor in February. Representing the WGG, we lobbied the European Union and the U.S. to no avail. Finally the group of 77 representing developing countries and China said yes; they would write the proposal and put it on the floor. But they could not get their act together in time for the resolution to be translated in UN languages in order to be considered by the entire Commission. So Section L, entitled “The Girl Child”, went to Beijing in brackets.

We had an enormous lobbying job ahead of us. In Beijing, we requested space for a daily caucus and plotted those countries to be lobbied. At the same time, we formed “The International Network for Girls” to reach out to organizations advocating for girls worldwide. Following Beijing, the CSW was mandated to review sections of the Beijing Platform for Action at its annual meetings in March.

Section L on the Girl Child came up in 1998. To help strengthen the importance of Section L, WGG brought 15 girls, ranging in ages from 14 to 18, from Armenia, Brazil, Chile, Gambia, Nepal, Singapore, United Kingdom and the U.S. The UN delegates were overwhelmed by the girls’ knowledge of the issues and their eloquence in expressing them. Since then the WGG has maintained a strong voice at the UN for girls’ rights and participation.

*As told by Mary Purcell, AAUW*



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# Action for Girls

## UNICEF Works to Recognize Girls' Rights



Bella Abzug speaks at Beijing

At the World Human Rights Conference held in Vienna in June of 1993, I was part of the UNICEF delegation whose goal was to ensure that children's rights were not forgotten. As part of our advocacy efforts, we participated in an NGO side event organized by several women's groups to argue that women needed to fight for the rights of girls too. When one of the members of the UNICEF delegation began to speak, a group of young western women began to chant: "No children, no children, no children." That prevented discussion of the points that we had raised. We suspected that they were reacting automatically to any mention of children as being related to women's role as mothers and so had not listened to what we were saying.

When we returned to New York, we began to think about how we could ensure that the Beijing Women's Conference would not be dominated by the same attitude towards girls. We had only two years to change the minds of the leaders of the women's movement, predominantly western women. Having had access to education, health care, and play as girls, they were focused on women's equal participation in political and economic life. The challenge was to make them realize that in other parts of the world, for too many girls, any chance to enjoy equal rights as women had already been lost during their childhood. By the time they were 18, the majority had little or no schooling, had spent their childhood years helping with household chores, were married and often the mother of one or two children.

I began talking to the NGOs in the NGO Committee on UNICEF about what we could do. Mary Purcell and Kate Katzki enthusiastically took up the challenge, and the Working

Group on Girls was formed. With Sarah Friedman's help, WGG produced brochures and articles, and over the next two years its membership grew as Mary and Kate spoke up at various meetings organized around the UN in New York. Those contacts led to discussions with two of the most outspoken of the leaders of the women's movement, Bella Abzug, the Secretary General of WEDO, and Charlotte Bunch, Director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University. In time they understood our message and became persuasive allies.

We also worked with UNIFEM to bring the women's and children's movements together. We organized a two-day workshop attended by women's and children's NGOs to look at the complementarities between the CRC and CEDAW. Out of that workshop came a widely disseminated folder of materials setting out the ways in which they reinforce each other.

By the time we got to Beijing, the WGG had become a strong advocacy group, and women from other international NGOs joined our strategy sessions in Beijing. Together we had numerous contacts with a variety of governments, and armed with the draft Section on Girls that we had developed, we worked hard with the UNICEF delegation to get it adopted as part of the final Plan of Action. We also organized side events to present our point of view to the representatives of NGOs from all parts of the world.

Thanks not only to the efforts of the WGG but also of women's groups from regions where girls faced serious disadvantages, history was made at the Fourth Women's Conference when a Plan of Action with a section dedicated to girls was adopted. Together, we influenced the direction of the women's movement to include girls.

Janet Nelson

Chief NGO Liaison Section (622), UNICEF

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• We began using the terminology "girl child" and moved on to "girls"  
• dropping the "child" because it was such a sensitive issue. "Girls"  
• also pulled us forward to the idea of the "girl as her own advocate",  
• which the "girl child" terminology did not support. The concept of life  
• cycle and age differences began to creep in to advocacy efforts. There  
• was a divide between the young girls (4-12) where there is a need to  
• emphasize the right to education and the rights/issues of older girls  
• (14-18), which meshed with the rights of young women (18-21), paving  
• the way to working with the Women's NGOs.

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- Hourig Babakian, Past Co-Chair, WGG  
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# Action for Girls

## Q and A with Sara Friedman



Jackie Shapiro

Kate Katzki at her birthday celebration

**JS:** Sara, for this commemorative issue of Action for Girls, I've been referring to you, Hourig Babikian, Mary Purcell and Kate Katzki as the "founding mothers." When did you come in?

**SF:** Just to add to what others have written, Gordon Klopff, an academic activist, former Dean of Bank Street College and chair of the NGO Committee on Education, suggested forming WGG and introduced us to Mary. I was working for Gordon and for the NGO Committee. So I jumped in on all four feet.

**JS:** Wasn't Beijing on the doorstep? What were you planning to do there?

**SF:** We had no idea and began by following Mary, who brought her force of personality and UN expertise to the task at hand. She explained that the three planning committees (prepcoms) were the most important part of Beijing, and that we had to be prepared. We were shocked to find barely a single mention of girls in the Platform of Action and began adding "and girls" to relevant paragraphs. Significantly, it was the African NGOs that convinced us that a separate section was needed to address the multiple challenges and discriminations facing girls.

**JS:** Following Beijing you did so much without letting up: organizing girls' caucuses, running workshops and conferences, writing the newsletter, and continuing to do advocacy. What kept you going?

**SF:** Two things, I think. First, there was always something coming up to instigate action: a Beijing anniversary, another CSW meeting. The second, more important reason, was the strength of our teamwork and collaboration among ourselves

and with UNICEF. We respected each other and knew we had a goal to meet and obstacles to face. That doesn't mean we didn't argue. We did, often. But Kate's wisdom and consistency always resolved them.

**JS:** What do you see as your two greatest accomplishments and why?

**SF:** Bringing 15 girls from all over the world to speak at the UN General Assembly was our most significant achievement. That was a big first. It was also a huge challenge with much resistance from UN officials to teenage girls coming to a UN session (how would they behave?), let alone speaking before the Commission on the Status of Women. We persisted and the girls were amazingly articulate. They wowed the large audience and set the hallmark of WGG, the engagement and empowerment of girls at the UN.

Bringing girls was as much a logistical nightmare as it was a success: How would they be selected and who would pay for their expenses? How would they be prepared and chaperoned throughout their stay? Hourig's masterful skills made short shrift of these challenges.

**JS:** And the other?

**SF:** The International Network for Girls (INFG) was an accomplishment we couldn't keep going because it was too much work and we had too few resources. The goal was to create and bring into the UN a network of women's NGOs worldwide that worked with girls to provide support, mentoring, development of girls' groups and tracking the progress for girls by governments. In Beijing we began collecting contacts and followed up with communications to develop a database. In preparation for CSW 42 at which the progress of the girl-child was a priority topic, we sent out a survey to 1,000 NGOs in our database asking about the progress of girls in their countries. 248 NGOs responded, which formed the basis for our landmark report "Clearing A Path for Girls."

It is thrilling today to know that the work of WGG has continued with a focus on continuously increasing girls' empowerment. The question, however, remains: what has been the progress of girls over the past 20 years? Can we find out?

Jackie Shapiro, Past Chair WGG

# Action for Girls

## The Beijing Conference Is Remembered

I went to Beijing as one of the representatives of the League of Women Voters, US, with a commitment to the girl child. As part of a new group called the Working Group on the Girl Child (later the Working Group on Girls), we lobbied to insert language into the document to ensure that the girl child's needs would be addressed. Through our efforts and the work by the African NGOs, Section "L" was inserted in the document and adopted unanimously by the 189 member states attending the Conference, and the girl child became a priority for action by the international community.

Thirty thousand women came at great personal sacrifice from great distances to the Fourth World Conference on Women. They came with a sense of hope that Beijing would make a difference in their lives and positive change would happen for themselves, their children, families and communities.

There were two meetings: one in Beijing, the Conference attended by the delegations of the 189 member states of the UN, and one in Huairou, the NGO Forum attended by thirty thousand women. In Huairou there were women whose dress identified them as coming from many different countries and though we didn't share the same language, we shared the same beliefs and commitments. As we passed each other on the streets of Huairou, we smiled because we knew we shared a common passion and determination to work for the rights of women and girls. NGO participants gave and attended workshops, networked and raised the world's consciousness about the issues of women and girls.

Girls first made it on to the world stage at the Beijing conference. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) was ratified, a document that the delegates could take home to their communities and governments to advocate for implementation to improve the lives of women and girls. Although it is not a legally binding document, the BPfA raised the consciousness of governments, NGOs, women, men, girls and boys about girls' rights. Today, the WGG continues to work with and for girls everywhere.

I have never forgotten Beijing.

Margery Cohen  
League of Women Voters, USA

### Action for Girls

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Please address questions about the articles to the authors at [wggcontact@gmail.com](mailto:wggcontact@gmail.com) Reprinting of articles is encouraged with credit given to Action for Girls. We welcome articles by NGOs.

## WGG Advocates for Section L on Girls in BPfA

It was exciting to be in on the founding of WGG. We little dreamed that our work would expand, continue to today and be such a force for change at the UN. At the first meeting of WGG, we decided on our plan of action. The preparatory meetings (prepcoms) for the World Summit for Social Development and for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing were about to begin.



Doris Schapira speaks at the UN

We had the draft documents for each of the prepcoms available. The WGG members set to work combing through the document and changing "women" where mentioned to "women and girls" where appropriate. It might sound as if we were not very ambitious, but girls were not mentioned or thought of at the UN at that time. Then we set about creating a fact sheet that explained the importance of including girls and outlining the problems unique to girls to hand to government delegates.

Juan Somavia, who chaired the prepcoms for the World Summit on Social Development, gave NGOs access to the delegates and allowed us to speak at the meetings, a first. We held caucus meetings every day to plan strategy for the lobbying, to examine any new text in the document and to suggest where girls could be inserted.

Prior to the Beijing prepcoms, there had been regional meetings. The women from the African regional meeting of NGOs decided they would come to the prepcom in New York to insist on the inclusion of the girl child. We worked closely with the African NGOs at our caucus meetings. As many African countries were part of the Group of 77, a major government-negotiating block of developing countries, our partnership allowed us to reach many delegates.

My first advocacy effort was to talk to the Chinese delegation. I was very frightened because our lobbying fact sheet included the infanticide of the girl child, which was occurring in China. The gentleman I spoke with was very polite and listened to what I had to say, while translating to his colleagues. When I finished what I had to say, he bowed to me and I bowed back. After that I was no longer afraid to approach other delegates. In fact, I said to myself, this is a piece of cake.

In the Outcome Document from the Fourth World Conference on Women, The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), not only were girls mentioned but also a separate section, Section L, on girls was adopted. Girls are now on the UN agenda.

The future task for WGG is to be sure the rights of girls are fully implemented. It is important for WGG to keep working toward its goals and not give up. We never know how much we can effect change. Often it takes a long time.

Doris Schapira, League of Women Voters, U.S.