

Listening to Girls

by Neera Kuckreja Sohoni, Ph.D.

Until recently, girls have been the invisible component of feminist literature. They have also figured only marginally in the women in development discourse. But since the 1990s, a new paradigm is emerging which is devoted to *actively listening* to girls, and relying on their voices to gain a better understanding of the conception of the adult female. Author Brown and Gilligan (1992) and Orenstein (1994) have established how, as girls grow up to be young women, they give up their voice, abandon their self for the sake of becoming "good" or acceptable, and having relationships with men. By "listening to girls," they contend, "we learn about women, and the psychology of women." The issue of "voice" has thus become a significant concern of the discourse on girls and women.

As a researcher of the status of girls, and as a mother of three adolescent girls, my overriding commitment in the past year has been to integrate girls' voices into the Beijing (and the pre- and the post-Beijing) dialogue through the means of a "Speak-up" *on* and *by* girls at the Beijing Conference. The Centre for Feminist Research at York University responded magnificently to set aside two hours on March 8, 1995 for a Girls' Speak up. The forum was a part of the pre-Beijing Conference on Women's Rights are Human Rights: A Focus on Youth, March 6-8, 1995 organized by the Centre. The sponsors invited me to chair the Speak-up but we agreed that it would defeat the purpose if we were to put adult women in charge. For the same reason it was decided not to have a formal structured agenda. Prior consultation with a group of girls—age group 11 to 20/22—indicated that they preferred a less formal seating arrangement, allowing persons to face each other, and to talk candidly without feeling that each comment must elicit a response of a correction from a panelist or other adult. The consultation also yielded a set of key issues or concerns which girls felt they were most interested in talking about. The following day, when the "Speak-up" commenced, there was some initial uncertainty, even hostility, as the age factor "acted out." To begin with, some of the girls seemed angry and frustrated at women for not being sufficiently encompassing of the concerns and voices of girls. They also felt constrained by the limited time made available to them. We decided that at the end of the two hour session, the women would depart, leaving the girls to carry on through late afternoon. The girls welcomed and fully utilized the opportunity presented by the "Speak-up" to express and compose their thoughts in the form of concrete recommendations for transmittal to the Beijing Conference.

At the concluding session, they presented their recom-

mendations to the larger conference. Although I did not attend the session, those who did confirmed that the girls outperformed adult women by coming up with a remarkable set of thought-provoking, well-defined recommendations. They rage from: proactive treatment and the more punitive tackling of the harassment and abuse of girls; greater governmental commitment to provision of shelters for girls facing abusive families; greater representation of girls at all levels of education including curriculum development; more provision for peer support; sensitivity training of teachers of both genders in the critical areas of gender and sexuality; development of alternative forms of education; increasing the access and affordability of higher education; aggressive tackling of the cycle of female poverty, low employment, and low education; assistance to girls in the form of support structures to prevent their falling into street life and prostitution; sexual autonomy for girls without fear of homophobic persecution; access to free and confidential abortion and contraception; counselling services to heal and aid the young female victims of abuse; greater induction of young women in political structures; greater vesting of legitimate political power in the young; an end to the pathologization of young women's health needs as problems

"Governments must promote a shift in focus from the medicalization of women's social problems and towards the social conditions which caused them," reads one recommendation, while another upholds the right of girls and women to have their health needs recognized and treated on the basis of a credible body of knowledge.

On the whole, the recommendations echo the felt needs of girls who fall between the cracks of childhood and adulthood. The public safety net for children and adults does not necessarily encompass adolescent girls. Above all, the girls vindicate my belief and that of countless adult women that girls are self-defined and self-driven, and they are eager and deserve to be the protagonists in the feminist, and the women in development, movements.

The one billion odd voices that girls constitute globally must be heard at Beijing and in all future forums thereafter. Luckily, since my return from Toronto, I have confirmation that a "Speak Up on Girls" is being scheduled at Beijing co-sponsored by Asian Women's Human Rights Council and Children's Defense International. The York University "happening" could provide a useful paradigm for that unique global activity.

Neera Kuckreja Sohoni is Affiliated Scholar at Stanford University's Institute for Research on Women and Gender.