

UNICEF & NEW SCHOOL SPONSOR THE 5TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

**TOPIC: “ADOLESCENT GIRLS – CORNERSTONE OF SOCIETY
BUILDING EVIDENCE AND POLICIES FOR INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES”**

4/26-9/2010

On April 26-28th, 2010, Beth Adamson attended the 5th Annual International Conference co-sponsored by UNICEF and the Graduate Program in International Affairs at the New School, addressing the topic, “Adolescent Girls – the Cornerstone of Society: Building Evidence and Policies for Inclusive Societies.” Beth, a member of the Working Group on UN Issues for the Office of the Anglican United Nations Observer, represents AUNO on the Steering Group of the Working Group on Girls for the NGO Committee on UNICEF. The WGG is an action-oriented membership committee made up of representatives from over 60 NGOs and Faith-based organizations to promote the rights of girls in all areas and stages of their lives, advancing the rights and status of girls and assisting them to develop their full potential as women. These objectives are in line with the Millennium Development Goals of promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving women’s health, achieving universal education, and the elimination of extreme poverty. [For information on the WGG, see: www.girlsrights.org]

As Anglicans committed to the Millennium Development Goals, the topic of the Conference was relevant, in understanding the importance of lifting up the girl child – just as Jesus lifted up the marginalized – and supporting girls as they transition into adult women who are more empowered than the young women of previous generations. This dynamic enhances the creation of more inclusive societies throughout the globe. Presenters were selected from all parts of the world to discuss current research, data and practices that can inform our thinking around key issues related to adolescent girls. The premise of the Conference was that “Strategic investments in girls’ social protection, health, education and livelihood skills promote social justice and are essential for achieving internationally agreed upon development goals, human rights and other global commitments.” It is our responsibility as Christians to become familiar with current data, research, and best practices that address the specific challenges of marginalization, inaccessibility to resources, and invisibility of the girl child. As faith members of civil society, we can address the needs of the adolescent girl in our own communities, raising the standards that mark a girl’s life.

The UNICEF - New School Conference on the Adolescent Girl provided 3 expert panels and 19 papers presented on the topics of: (1) Girls Empowerment: Strengthening Healthy Resistance and Courage in Girls, (2) Realizing the Rights of Girls: New Approaches and Research, (3) Using Evidence and Data to Make Adolescent Girls Visible, (4) Adolescent Girls in the Global Economy, (5) Opportunities of Technology and Innovations for the Girl Child, (6) Context, Climate and Change for the Girls of Haiti, (7) Lessons Learned on Keeping Girls at the Center, (8) Gender Analyses of Emerging Trends, and (9) Looking Ahead: Creating Strategic Partnerships for the Future of Adolescent Girls.

We had the privilege of hearing addresses by many important members of the UN, NGO, and academic communities who are known for their knowledge of key issues pertaining to the girl child: Marta Mauras, member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child; Astrid Helle Ajamay, Deputy General of the Ministry’s UN section for Norway; Elizabeth Gibbons, UNICEF; Tamara Kreinen and Kathy Calvin of the UN Foundation; Trine Lunde, World Bank; Martha Brady, World Population Fund, Mary Robinson, of Realizing Rights, the New York Times writer and author William Kristof, as well as many other knowledgeable presenters from UNICEF and academic postings around the globe.

The Introduction to the Conference on Adolescent Girls makes the bold assertion that adolescent girls, who are navigating the second decade of their lives, are the cornerstone of society, an assertion that has gained considerable momentum in this past year. A vast series of campaigns have been launched to promote the

investment in girls. International organizations are recognizing that global partnerships and targeted investment in the 600 million girls of the Global South can raise them out of poverty, protect their rights, and thus, help to meet the Millennium Development Goals. “As evolving young women who already significantly contribute to their families, and as future adults who will contribute to their communities, adolescent girls are now recognized as having a strategic role to play in promoting social justice and building inclusive societies.” So states the author of the Conference Background Paper, Asmaa Donahue. The conference review explores four major development challenges that impact girls’ lives now and toward the future: (1) demographic transitions (including ‘youth bulges’), (2) the current global economic crisis (which can threaten poverty and recent gains made), (3) climate change (which has inspired youth leadership programs), and (4) the development & increasing use of information and communication technologies (which provide economic and educational opportunities for those with access – but widen the gap for those without). These developments present challenges and risks as well as opportunities for adolescent girls – exacerbated in the developing countries.

Caren Grown of American University led us into an interesting Session on “Adolescent Girls and the Global Economy” with her discussion of “Adolescent Girls and the Macroeconomy” by saying that one must study adolescent girls in the framework of “whole systems” in terms of “goods and services” – not by studying incidental experiences but as if from a satellite in the sky looking on girls from the 100,000 person level. Only then, can we understand the gender gaps in macroeconomic policy. She set for us the definition of “adolescence” as ages 15-25, because that is now the “transition period” of growth, mind set, increasing responsibilities, and real entry into society. And she re-iterated the vast gender inequality in education and in wages, with the greatest gender gap in secondary education, despite the fact that a correction in this area would provide the greatest long-term benefit to girls and great long-term economic influence on their societies. Girls with a secondary education have a lower rate of fertility and a higher rate of savings. Ms. Grown stressed the need for data to continue to study this important issue with consequences to whole systems of girls and therefore to societies.

One fascinating paper presented by Berk Özler of the World Bank, discussed ‘Cash Transfers to Adolescent Girls’. It has become a recent practice to pay families small funds to keep their children in school. At-risk poverty-ridden families consistently depend on economic help from their children and/or domestic labor by their girls, a key reason that adolescent girls are removed from schools. This continues the cycle of poverty, and education is a key to breaking that cycle. The out-of-school girl child is more likely to become pregnant and is also at greater risk for HIV. Thus, it may be no surprise to find that investment in school attendance for girls has demonstrably reduced the risk of HIV. The World Bank reviewed a program via Zomba Cash Transfer Program in Malawi. 4000 girls, split amongst 3 areas, were given money for their education alongside the money given to their families. While the immediate evidence should be considered tenuous (as early evidence) Özler described a dramatic change in ‘Return to School’ rates (17 % return became 62% return). There is a hope to follow this study in Malawi with more studies elsewhere.

Another interesting series of discussions followed the use of ICT (Communication Technology) as a tool for changing girls’ lives. Many positive outcomes have emerged: break-down of isolation, a source of learning, socializing, and overcoming challenges (many of which are more easily handled by phone rather than face-to-face). Chris Hurday of NYU identified the Assets: cost-effective, desirable, youth friendly, and gender equal, but points out the need to address Challenges: 21% of most of the global south cannot get access to IT, technical gadgets can be a target for violent crime, and a “gadget” doesn’t – on its own – change attitudes. This arena clearly gave us food for thought, to be explored.

One of our several informative panels gave us important guidelines for NGOs (as well as Faith Based Organizations), by outlining important Actions: Think ‘Big Picture’ from the beginning, Design your Actions for scale and for sustainability, Advocacy is Key, Research is necessary – Data is always useful,

focus on the MDGs as the key Framework, Partner Government policy work with Community Involvement, Show the Benefits of investing in Girls as a win-win effort, build Capacity and Political Will, and never forget that Focus on Girls Rights is both a significant Human Rights action and a strong Investment that will bring returns. These are useful words of advice for those of us in a global faith-based communion.

There was also a recurring response to the skeptics who ask “Why Girls and not also Boys? The key response is that the benefits of most efforts for girls will also bring benefits to boys. Furthermore, research and reports demonstrate that adolescent girls face extra challenges that simply aren’t faced by boys, particularly when it comes to staying in school. Girls reap greater returns – that affect society. They are less likely to get pregnant (which creates a cycle of school drop-out, poverty, health issues, more children, etc.) Girls who finish schooling or training programs have higher opportunities in paid labor. And, with all occupations, the earning increment for an extra year in school is greater for women than for men.

I urge you, the reader, to review a copy of the Center for Global Development’s recent publications on girls: **‘Girls Count: A Global Investment & Action Agenda’**, which begins with a review of 10 Actions on How Girls Today Can End Poverty Tomorrow: 1. Give adolescent girls an officially recognized identification (to prevent underage marriage) 2. Collect data on adolescent girls and disaggregate it by age (to assess which programs are reaching adolescent girls) 3. Increase funding for adolescent girls – and track what it achieves (a 20% increase in bilateral development funding for gender equality as part of a comprehensive effort to invest in this population) 4. Expand opportunities for girls to attend secondary school (using subsidies, scholarships, and conditional cash transfers, and tracking enrollment and completion rates) 5. Refocus HIV/AIDs prevention strategies to focus on adolescent girls (to address the disproportionate infection rates of girls to boys) 6. Re-orient health delivery systems to work for adolescent girls (check-ups for girls starting age 10 to screen for all health risks) 7. Economically empower adolescent girls by building and protecting their assets (building marketable skills, internships, training opportunities, mentoring) 8. Make the law work for adolescent girls (repealing laws that legitimize discrimination against girls & women) 9. Equip adolescent girls to advocate for themselves and their communities (educate girls about their rights) 10. Mobilize communities, families, men, and boys to support adolescent girls (support religious and community leaders to foster healthier, more supportive communities for girls).

[Report at: www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/15154]

I encourage you to also review the Population Council’s document, **‘New Lessons: The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls’**, part of the growing **‘Girls Count’** series, which identifies 10 Actions for Adolescent Girls’ Education: 1. Collect and compile data on non-formal education, 2. Build and maintain a global database for education programs for adolescent girls, 3. Expand opportunities for girls to attend secondary school, 4. Support the non-formal educational system, 5. Develop after-school tutoring and mentoring programs in both primary and secondary schools, 6. Produce curricula relevant to adolescent girls, 7. Offer post-secondary vocational programs, 8. Provide training and ongoing incentives for women to enter and remain in teaching, 9. Promote easy transitions between non-formal and formal schools, 10.

Encourage and evaluate innovation. [Report at: <http://www.cominit.com/en/node/312738>]

The growing amount of research is convincing. Investment in girls – particularly Adolescent girls – is not just a Human Rights commitment. It provides a smart investment of global action that reaps rewards that positively affect many of the Millennium Development Goals, most particularly: Ending Poverty and Hunger, Attaining Universal Education, Attaining Gender Equity, Improving Child Health, Improving Maternal Health, and Combating HIV/AIDS. As a Communion committed to the MDGs, we must pay close attention to the message given.