



**a girl goes to the u.n.**

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I've been selected as one of fifteen delegates from the Episcopal Church USA to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, meeting February 23 until March 9, 2007 at the United Nations headquarters in New York City. I was stunned at the news of being chosen; I applied mostly to appease a friend who keeps up with these things.

What can I do with this information and how do I use this opportunity to advocate for women and girls around the world? How can what I learn, here, make a difference? Since my selection, I feel a great sense of responsibility to gather as much information as possible (1) about the UN and its ability to address these issues with positive outcomes and (2) about how the women with which I'll be teamed might carry a message to our communities that will stir the hearts and minds of others to care, and translate that caring into action.

While in New York, I'll attend plenary sessions at the UN and participate in dialogue, with other delegates, regarding women's concerns around the globe. Twelve areas have emerged as focus priorities, divided between national/international concerns and internal church structure issues. The national/international areas include:

1. Human trafficking—an increasing global crisis
2. Girl-child and women's education and Millennium Developmental Goals
3. United Nations Commission of the Status of Women, (UNCSW)  
Beijing Circles
4. Sex education
5. Immigration issues and concerns

I've worked with the disenfranchised of developing nations and in U.S. Native reservations and inner cities since 1989. What has arisen from these experiences—and experiences from my own past—is a growing concern for young girls and women and the rapidly growing business of the trafficking of both. The situation of women and children, worldwide, is dire. For instance:

- 120 million girls undergo female genital mutilation, each year.
- 1.2 million girls are trafficked, each year.
- Girls (15-24) account for 76% of young people living with HIV.

- Girls face particular issues as refugees and displaced people, including: sexual violence, forced marriage, forced impregnation, lack of access to education, increased risk of HIV/AIDS, and economic exploitation.
- Child marriage affects millions of girls. In South Asia, 48% of girls are married before 18, 42% in Africa, and 29% in Latin America. It's not uncommon for girls to be married by the age of 15 or younger. Child marriage increases the girls' risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and chances of suffering from pregnancy-related complications, such as obstetric fistula. It also decreases their access to education.

[Sources: UNICEF, UNIFEM, INSTAW, UNFPA, Beijing Platform for Action, The Millennium Report]

In 1995, Beijing was the site of the Fourth World Conference on Women sponsored by the United Nations. It was there that the Beijing Platform for Action was produced. This year, we'll be taking a look at what has been done in the last ten years. Following is a summary of the Mission of the Beijing Platform for Action from 1995:

1. The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi Forward looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making.
2. The Platform for Action reaffirms the fundamental principle set forth in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, that the human rights of women and of the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.
3. The Platform for Action emphasizes that women share common concerns that can be addressed only by working together and in partnership with men towards the common goal of gender equality around the world. It respects and values the full diversity of women's situations and conditions and recognizes that some women face particular barriers to their empowerment.
4. The Platform for Action requires immediate and concerted action by all to create a peaceful, just and humane world based on human rights and fundamental freedoms—including the principle of equality for all people of all ages and from all walks of life—and, to this end, recognizes that broad-based and sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development is necessary to sustain social development and social justice.
5. The success of the Platform for Action will require a strong commitment on the part of governments, international organizations and institutions

at all levels. It will also require adequate mobilization of resources at the national and international levels as well as new and additional resources to the developing countries from all available funding mechanisms.

I know there are women in the world who don't define women's empowerment as I do. In fact, many people in the world look at American women and *don't* want to respond to freedom in the same way. I'm confident that I have a lot to learn from others, and that I may be required to change my understanding, my beliefs about women's issues, and even my life. I can't expect to change what I feel is wrong with the world if I don't realize that we *all* have to bend and flex, grow and stretch.

I've also lived long enough to know it'll be uncomfortable.

One statement I read on the Web site of the intercontinental Anglican Women's Empowerment, representatives of the Anglican Consultative Council to the UN, really struck me.

"This sisterhood of suffering is at the heart of our theology, and our commitment to transforming the whole world through peace, justice, and rebuilding is central to our faith."

That, I realize, is the common bond. There's a sisterhood of suffering, and it's gathering at the UN in February—despite language and cultural barriers, differing habits and occasional misconceptions. It's not about who suffers more or in what way, but that we share the *tie* of sisterhood and jointly stand to determinedly turn suffering into joy.

Over the course of this year, I hope to share, in this column, what I learn, how the process unfolds, and where this new path will lead me. I'll be brave and expose my blunderings and naïveté, too. But I hope that my experience will open the door to real communication—the kind that creates understanding. I want to share the information I'm given to "spread the wealth" of a growing collective of people who believe and act for a better world.

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