



Hope for Girls: Transformation of Value Systems

By Jennifer Ang, UN Representative, WFPW, International

The **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)** is part of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), one of the main bodies within the UN. The **CSW** was established in 1946 as a mechanism to monitor issues relating to the political, economic, social and educational rights of women.

The Commission holds an annual session centered on a particular theme. This year, from February 26 to March 9, the theme discussed was, “The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.” The term “girl child” is a UN label that refers to a female between zero and eighteen years of age.

To coincide with the annual CSW session, WFPW, International (WFPWI) held a panel discussion on February 27 in the United Nations Church Center across the street from the UN headquarters in New York City. The discussion was entitled “Transforming Value Systems to Eliminate Discrimination Against and Enhance the Status of the Girl Child.” It was moderated by Ms. Bonnie Berry, UN Representative of WFPWI.

Ms. Motoko Sugiyama, Director of the UN Office of WFPWI, spoke first. She stated that there is a new level of recognition of the historical problem of discrimination against the girl child. Poverty is known as a contributing factor since poor girl children often have to go into labor, which can include force and sexual servitude.

Ms. Sugiyama emphasized the importance of changing people’s values to combat the dehumanization of the girl child often found in the developing world.



Ms. Motoko Sugiyama

The next panelist was Dr. Keisuke Noda, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the Unification Theological Seminary in Barrytown, New York.

His presentation was titled, “A Value Perspective Underlying the Abuse of the Girl Child: Critique and Counterproposal.” He told the audience that, while he prepared a written speech, he would speak from his heart.



Dr. Keisuke Noda

Dr. Noda pointed out that, in developing countries, many girls are viewed either as child-bearing machines, tools, or property. This perspective results in girls being seen as objects that can be possessed, used, and sold or bought.

He argued that the only way to end the abusive treatment of the girl child is to end the concept of people as merely material objects, and to spread the understanding that all human beings have a spiritual aspect which must be respected and preserved.



The next panelist to present was Ms. Rajeswari Menon, Senior Principal of the S.B.O.A. School and Junior College in Chennai, India. The S.B.O.A. School was started in 1979, the UN International Year of the Child, as a project of the State Bank Officers Association. Today, it is one of the top schools in India.

Ms. Menon shared an excerpt from a poem written by an Indian poet, Subramania Bharathi, 100 years ago.

*We will burn the foolishness
That despises womenfolk
No more subservience or slavery
In any walk of life
Man and woman shall equal be
In this land of ours*



Ms. Rajeswari Menon

This poem was written before the liberation of India from British rule and the expansion of women's freedom. However, after liberation, many women went back into their homes and kitchens where men were still the masters.

Ms. Menon stated that in areas of India today, dowry, child marriage, female infanticide, and female feticide are practiced. Rather than blaming poor economic conditions, Ms. Menon said that a new value system must come into being. She emphasized that the girl child herself must have a sense of her own dignity and

value. “Education is not only schooling, it is also awareness of the need for a dignified life,” she said.

The final panel presentation was given by Ms. Nora Spurgin, Principal of Bridgeport International Academy, a private, college preparatory high school. She was also the first president of WFWP, USA, during the 1990s.



Ms. Nora Spurgin

Like the other panelists, Ms. Spurgin stated that any fundamental change must begin with value transformation. “Governments and legislation touch only the surface of communities and their actions,” she stated.

She laid out what she believed to be four key areas that shape the values of an individual, and specifically of the girl child: **religion, culture, economy, and education.**

If negative interpretations of a religion are being taught to the girl child, reeducation is necessary in the positive aspects of her religion, which can uplift her dignity and self-esteem.

While negative cultural traditions may be difficult to change, Ms. Spurgin suggested that economic incentives could encourage better treatment of girl children. She cited *The Godparents Association* in Uganda which pays for schooling for girls who decide not to accept female genital mutilation. The girls’ education also introduces them to a broader worldview outside of their village.

Ms. Spurgin spoke of the power of education to change value systems. Both the girl child and her family often need education on the advantages of abandoning harmful social practices.



Questions and comments were invited from the audience comprised of men and women from different countries and backgrounds. Many offered comments. Some women had direct experience with the situations described. A very passionate discussion of the situation of the girl child emerged, carrying the program well past its appointed ending time.

Many ideas and solutions were discussed throughout the evening, and participants were united in their determination to work to end discriminatory and harmful practices against the girl child.

