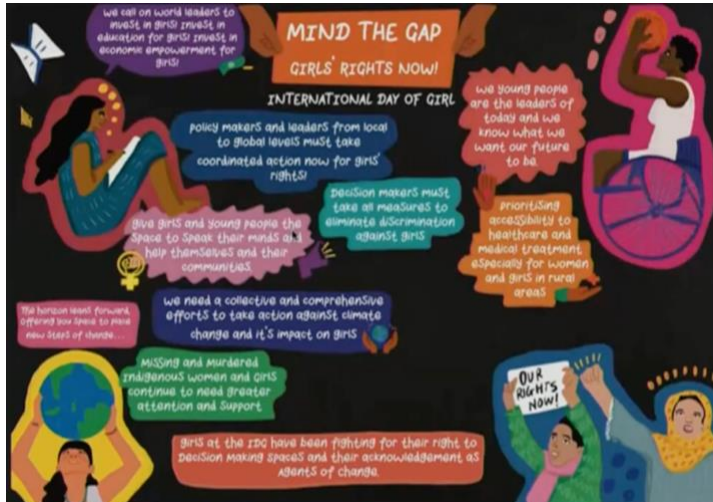


“Girls Speak out”: Minding the Girls’ Rights Gap highlighted on the International Day of the Girl

by Dionne R. Regis



Artist Ipsita Divedi’s graphic recording of the transformative conversations between the girl activists and UN representative during this event

“Keep dreaming even if it breaks your heart”. These words were shared from a girl in Afghanistan determined to change the culture of her society in which she lived—to create change in a society that sees women as second class, nameless, and insignificant without dependency. We will hear more from her story later.

The International Day of the Girl Child (IDG) recognizes girls’ rights in areas not limited to equity in education, healthcare, mental healthcare, bodily autonomy, and independence to make individual choices in the gendered system. The Day acknowledges unique challenges faced by girls around the world.

The blueprint to IDG was established in 1995 at the World Conference on Women in Beijing where countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It was the most progressive plan ever created for advancing women’s rights and the first document to specifically call out girl’s rights. Sixteen years later, on December 19, 2011, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 66/170, declaring October 11 as the International Day of the Girl Child, recognizing girls’ rights and the path to change.

The United Nations takes IDG very seriously as it is heavily related to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals which were adopted by world leaders at the UN General Assembly in 2015. SDG 5 is inherent to International Day of the Girl Child because of its goal towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. According to the UN website (n.d.)

“The International Day of the Girl Child focuses attention on the need to address the challenges girls face and to promote girls’ empowerment and the fulfilment of their human rights. Adolescent girls have the right to a safe, educated, and healthy life, not only during these critical formative years, but also as they mature into women. If effectively supported during the adolescent years, girls have the potential to change the world – both as the empowered girls of today and as tomorrow’s workers, mothers, entrepreneurs, mentors, household heads, and political leaders” (1).

The 10th year anniversary of the IDG was celebrated with a focused theme on: **“IDG+10: Minding the Girls’ Rights Gap—Active, Accountable Participants of IDG”**, hosted by “The Working Group on Girls”, a non-profit organization that challenges the systemic discrimination of girls, with UN-Women and co-sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Canada, Peru, and Turkey to the United Nations. This event took place in a hybrid format, both in person on Tuesday, October 11, 2022, at UN Headquarters in New York City and virtually through Zoom.

The IDG provides girl activists the space to advocate for change on a local, national, and global level, and to influence policy, while also sharing impactful and painful stories that affect girls all around the world.



Flyer for the “Girls Speak Out” event

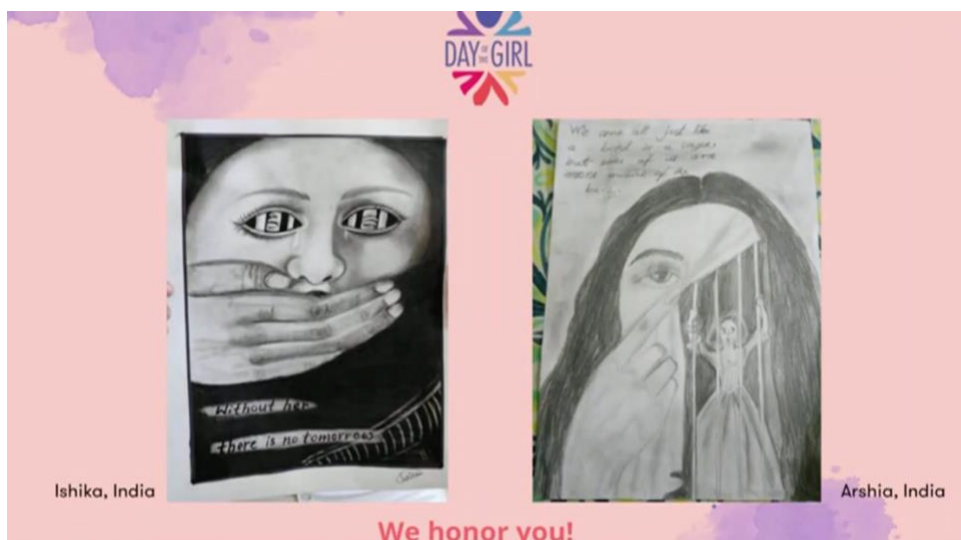
The programming commenced with the first segment of “Girls Speak Out”, consisting of a few words about the late noted American memoirist, popular poet, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, delivered by the first of three moderators, a girl activist of India, Kashvi Agarwal, representing the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Those words set the tone for the rest of program, permitting the emotion, hope and perseverance to speak for others who cannot speak, and to inspire change. The second moderator Alexia, a teen currently living and studying in

Senegal under the US Department of State Kennedy Lugar “Yes Abroad” program, shared more words from Maya Angelou: “We need to offer space to offer new steps of change for girls worldwide to be able to thrive”.

In a recorded message, Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres spoke about the need to educate girls so they can create a better society not only for themselves but for others, leading healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives. Gaining the right healthcare leads to greater self-esteem and confidence, and bodily autonomy, he said. Girls have the right to leave situations of violence and to be safe. He spoke about the need to let girls learn, specifically in countries such as Afghanistan and made a specific plea to the Taliban. His message ended with an impactful statement: “Investing in girls is investing in our common future”.

Opening Remarks were shared by the Permanent Representative of the Mission of Canada to the United Nations, H.E. Robert Rae. Ambassador Rae shared his personal experience, speaking about being a father to three young women and now having grandchildren, two which are girls. He talked about the importance of including women in grassroots gender equality movements. He referenced the hardships of Iran and Afghanistan and how the cause of freedom and equality is being led by women in various parts of the world, referring to the current revolution in Iran by young people to protect girls’ and women’s choice to wear or not wear the hijab. Women’s rights and usage of morality police has always been an unsteady debate, he said, clarifying that it was the death of 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Masha Amini, who was visiting Tehran and detained by the morality police and subsequently died in custody, that ignited protests among women and young people (Farnaz Fassihi, Sept. 16, 2022). Lastly, Ambassador Rae spoke about October being women’s history month in Canada, and the radical work they do creates change, especially with the increase in threats to women’s rights across the globe, which is alarming.

During the next segment of “Girls Speak Out”, artwork was shared from different girl activists from around the world (only first names released) —signifying both pain and triumph. Ishika and Arshia from India created painfully striking pieces that represent the silencing of girls, as shown in the figure.



Artwork from two girls expressing pain being silenced

The third youth moderator, Demetria, representative of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, reminded the attendees about the Lenape, a Native American tribe that was forcibly displaced from their home that subsequently became New York City, and emphasized the need for fighting for Lenape girls. She offered specific honor to indigenous girls, girls in war zones, all girls affected by climate change and natural disaster, and all girls who cannot join this event for various reasons. She called for a moment of silence for Amanda Zulu, a high-achieving high school girl who was killed, along with her friend, in South Africa, by a 20-year-old man who broke into their house, and for other girls who have lost their lives to violence. Demetria spoke about the meaning of the International Day of the Girl Child and its founding roots 10 years ago. She mentioned the Beijing Declaration, quoting Section L: “All Children including girl children have the right to live without discrimination based on their or their families’ race, skin color, language, religion, national, or ethnic identity, political or other opinion, property, ability, or status” (pg. 165)(3). She called out the “stillness”—that despite this article being written in 1995, the hardships that women and girls faced still persist and are exacerbated more than ever before.

“It is now that we need to work harder than ever before to address these still prominent inequities,” she said.

Demetria’s call to action led into the first segment of the event on the topic of “Girl’s Access to Education”. This topic is aligned with Article 28th of the UN Convention on the Rights of A Child which establishes that: “Girls have the right to free education and the opportunity to go to school for as long as they want to” (4), yet millions of girls are out of school. A personal experience of a Malawian girl about a sexual assault was shared from a previously recorded IDG. She was walking through the streets of her village when a man told her to buy him some ice, upon which he pulled her into his house and raped her. When she told him that she would tell her mom, he told her, “What is *she* going to do?” She tried telling her grandmother who was home at the time, but the grandmother called her story “nonsense”. Therefore, the girl tried her best to forget about it, as she knew that her school wouldn’t allow her to continue going if they knew she wasn’t a virgin. Five years later, she found a school for orphans with her grandmother, and they asked her, “what her story was”, a question so simple and personal but which was never asked of her before. When they accepted her into the school after hearing her story, she realized that her story about being raped didn’t have to define who she is as a person. Now, she is speaking openly at the UN about her experience.

In the next section of the program, the first girl activist speaker was Maka, founder and President of MTC: Educated Girl Inc., a non-profit supporting rural communities in Zimbabwe, where she is from. More than 62 million girls in the country are out of school (5). In Zimbabwe, an extra hurdle is that families must be able to afford, and be willing to pay, tuition. There is also pressure about whether to educate boys or girls. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many girls lost their ability to go to school and it was harder to keep them out of forced early child marriages. According to the organization *Girls Not Brides*, 12 million girls globally are being raped under the guise of child marriages. The organization has followed and brought back many girls who were pledged to be married. MTC hosts a communal International Day of the Girl Child to celebrate themselves, where they also invite traditional, political, and religious leaders to be part of the day’s events and help them re-amplify the message of redesigning girl spaces. Maka and

MTC also use sports to spread awareness about the situation of Zimbabwean girls. Through their soccer initiatives, they provide psychosocial support, mental health support, and drug abuse awareness programs to thousands of girls a week. Their advocacy was successful in that in March 2020, the government of Zimbabwe passed a bill to prohibit child marriages. Maka continues to help girls become educated and future leaders, by having created a free library used by many local communities in rural Zimbabwe.

Next to speak was Ms. Sima Bahous, UN-Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women. She talked about wanting to decrease early childhood marriages, about making sure that all girls can get a secondary education as that reduces risk of factors such as HIV, and about wanting women to use their voices to keep fighting for their rights and to never stop believing in their goals to advocate needed change.

The conversation was continued by Permanent Representative of the Mission of Turkey to the United Nation, H.E. Feridun Sinirlioğlu who noted that he felt pride to mark this 10th anniversary with the Missions of Canada and Peru. He spoke about his personal endearment to seeing girls in STEM, because due to climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, and technological advancement, “We need more women and girls to help rebuild our future”.

The program transitioned to the next set of girl activist speakers. Isabella, a girl activist from the 2019 Speak Out told the story of a book she created. “Menil in her Heart” tells the story of issues surrounding missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. Isabella shared that more than 80% of native women endure violence in their lifetime. The rates of murder and missing women are ten times higher than the national average in the United States, yet more than 90% of these tragedies go undocumented by media. She referenced her own story about her grandpa saying that the further away they are from their Indian heritage, the closer to God they will be to show the negative impact of Western civilization and colonialism has caused on indigenous cultures and the negative influence it has done on the erasure of culture.

Next, Samantha, a girl activist from Nigeria shared about Nigerian girls being molested and forced into silence, in “baby-making factories”, where women and girls are held captive to deliver babies who are then sold illegally to adoptive parents. She started an organization called “Whisper a Code”, which encourages girls to open up to trusted allies, and helps girls in their communities so they also don’t become victims.

Then, H.E. Ambassador Manuel Rodríguez Cuadros, Permanent Representative of the Mission of Peru to the United Nations, shared a few words in Spanish to introduce girl activist Vivian from Ecuador. She spoke about the harsh realities women face in Ecuador—high levels of rape in all areas: at the park, on the bus, on the street—and the urgency to tell this story to all around the world who will listen.

Ann Maria, activist for gender-based violence and women’s health especially for victims of domestic violence, and representative for Girl Scouts USA spoke about how she started “Allies against Abused”, a nonprofit started in California in women’s shelters. She also started a project in Namungo, Uganda, raising money to start a clinic called St. Sebastian Hospital where women can go to get aid.

UNICEF Deputy Sheriff of Partnerships, Karin Hulshof, summed up the messages of the girl activists by reiterating the necessity of creating safe spaces mentally and physically for girls and women to speak out and get the help they need.

Closing remarks began with a impactful and heart-wrenching story and message submitted anonymously by an Afghani girl in 2014 which was shared in the 2014 International Day of the Girl event:

“I want to change the ways girls are looked at in my society. In Afghanistan I was not a good girl. I was supposed to wear a headscarf but did not wear one until I was 13. In Afghanistan, a good girl is a good girl when she wears a big, long dress and huge scarf, sits at home, doesn’t talk much and does what her family says. They tell her when something is good or bad for her. A good girl is one that doesn’t ask for rights, doesn’t ask for inheritance, serves her brothers and her bosses, cooks well, and doesn’t have her own name, but gets called by her brothers’ or father’s name. She always prays five times a day and reads the Qur’an instead of going to school. She doesn’t choose her husband or her future and keeps her father proud by doing all these things....”

“Even facing these hardships,” she said, “we must push through for the greater good—to see that girls and women are liberated. We must keep going even if we don’t see the end in sight”. Her words were inspiring, as she added: “Keep on dreaming, even if it breaks your heart”.

Lastly, Ipsita Divedi’s graphic recording of the transformative conversations between the girl activists and UN representative during this event was unveiled. It is the first drawing spotlighted in this article.

Deputy Permanent Representative of the Mission of Canada to the UN, Ambassador Richard Arbeiter, concluded this event with final remarks, sharing gratitude towards the powerful and influential work that these girls are doing and reiterating the call for action.

Personal Reflection

I chose this event to cover because of my passion about working with adolescents and emerging adults, especially young girls. Professionally, I want to look at how environmental factors impact self-esteem and self-worth and how that leads to anxiety, depression, and suicide. Some of the environmental factors involve media and bullying, but also involves harsher realities such as violence, sexual abuse, and lack of resources such as basic needs, and education. I wanted to attend this event to hear more from girl activists on how we can stop silencing their voices which leads to not only physical but mental constraints.

Event Overview:

TITLE: *IDG+10: Minding the Girls’ Rights Gap—Active, Accountable Participants of IDG*

CONFERENCE: *Girls Speak Out*

Date/Time: 11 October 2022

Location: United Nations Headquarters, New York City

Zoom Location: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1n/k1nb0k9ry7>

Moderators: Mackenzie, Kashvi, Alexia, and Demetra (girl activists)

Panelists: Girl Activist Maka, founder and president of MTC Educate A Girl Inc; Girl Activist Vivian, from Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Buen Pastor, Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd; UN-Under-Secretary-General Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women; H.E. Robert Rae, Permanent Representative of the Mission of Canada to the United Nations; H.E. Manuel Rodríguez Cuadros, Permanent Representative of the Mission of Peru to the United Nations; H.E. Feridun Sinirlioğlu, Permanent Representative of the Mission of Turkey to the United Nations; Ann Maria, activist for gender based violence and women's health especially for victims of domestic violence; Karin Hulshof, UNICEF Deputy Sheriff of Partnerships.

This day could not have been made possible without the collective sponsors, both allies and advocates, who help such important work as International Day of the Girl Child continue to prosper and make influential changes globally. Allies are Girls Learn International, International Presentation Association, NGO CSW, Pan Pacific and Southeast Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA), and the Salvation Army. Advocates are Decisions in Democracy, Girl Rising, Future Rising, and Just Like You Foundation (6).

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- (6) *Around the world 62 million girls are not in school. Millions more are ...* (n.d.). Retrieved October 23, 2022, from https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1869/USAID_LGL_FactSheet.pdf

Reported by Dionne R. Regis, a member of the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students pursuing a masters' degree in the Department of Counseling Psychology, Columbia University Teachers College, and a student in Professor Judy Kuriansky's class on "Psychology and the United Nations." In addition to my scholastic work, I have 6 years of experience mentoring young girls of color, instilling confidence and building future leaders. I am interested in furthering research surrounding the onset and diagnosis of anxiety and depression in late adolescents and emerging adults (age 17-29), including minoritized populations, especially within the Afro-Diaspora. Personally, I would like to explore the influence/effects of media, during and post-covid, on adolescents and emerging adults presenting with social anxiety, GAD, and depression, with self-esteem/self-worth (self-image, motivation, imposter syndrome) and stress being some of the moderators. I would also like to further research treatment using CBT and Strengths-based therapy and certain areas of positive psychology. Lastly, it is important for me that my work comes from a multicultural approach. I hope to be an influential advocate on a larger media scale.

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