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Introduction
Urban Girls Conference
April 14-15, 2000

SUSAN VIVIAN MANGOLD†

On April 14-15, 2000, the State University of New York at Buffalo sponsored the Urban Girls Conference in Buffalo, New York. The Conference was attended by approximately 700 scholars, practitioners, and teen women. It was an inspiring two-day exchange of ideas, creative expressions, and support for those concerned with the unique issues facing girls in urban areas today. This issue of the Buffalo Law Review publishes the papers from six presenters at the Conference, along with commentaries from five young women who write for Youth Communications, Inc. Receiving funding from the University at Buffalo School of Law and the University at Buffalo’s Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, Youth Communications, Inc. sent these writers to Buffalo to attend and critique the panel presentations, and reflect upon the Conference experience.

Planning for the Urban Girls Conference began at a meeting of the Institute for Research and Education on Women and Gender at the University at Buffalo. Lois Weis, a professor at the Graduate School of Education, became

† Associate Professor of Law, State University of New York at Buffalo School of Law. The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable work of Camille Catalano, Barbara Premielewski, and Laura Mangan, Associate Director of the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, in preparing for the Urban Girls Conference. The author also wishes to thank the 2000 School of Law Family Law Fellows—Kimberly Gensler, Jana Kosberg, and David Zamiello—for their assistance in planning the Conference.
the lead planner, along with Isabel Marcus, Professor of Law, Chair of Women Studies, and Director of the Institute for Research and Education on Women and Gender. The Conference was enhanced by the inspired vision of Dr. Jacquelyn Mitchell, former Dean of the Graduate School of Education. Dr. Mitchell encouraged the planners to move from the idea of a small academic conference to the larger vision of a conference that crossed boundaries while making critical inquiry of those boundaries. Dr. Mitchell died of cancer one year before the Conference convened but the potential of her vision was realized in the gathering that took place in her memory.

The boundaries questioned are suggested by the title of the Conference. This Conference was aimed at research and programs considering the unique experiences and problems of girls, and the opportunities available to them. Panelists were urged to think not just of young people, which often means boys, but, instead, to focus specifically on girls. Planners also wanted to shift focus from women generally to showcase research on young women, teens, and adolescents. The term "girls" was specifically chosen to include adolescents who may or may not be considered "young women." Finally, the Conference was intended to focus on girls through the geographic and sociological lens reflected in the term "urban." Neither of these boundaries—age or geography—was specifically defined by the planners, but was instead intended to foster discussion on girls who are often forgotten or subsumed by categories that overlook their life experiences.

The Conference was arranged with two days of concurrent panels and a keynote speech bridging the two days. From the outset of the planning process, Lani Guinier was identified as the ideal keynote speaker for the Conference. Her address was given after the first full day of panels and gave the conference a true sense of purpose and celebration. Her questioning of power and hierarchy as it impacts girls came up repeatedly during the subsequent panel sessions.

The Conference panels were arranged by an interdisciplinary program committee. Each committee member was responsible for organizing panels under a designated programmatic theme. The seven programmatic themes were: Health and Addictions; Violence and Abuse; Schooling; Opportunities Outside and Beyond High School;
Technology; Sexuality and Reproduction; and Sport and Physical Activity. In all, thirty-one panels were held.

These concurrent sessions were attended by a mix of adults and teens. In addition, there were seven panels targeted specifically for teens held on Teen Saturday during the second day of the conference.

I had the privilege of arranging six panels under the programmatic theme of Violence and Abuse, including two panels addressing legal issues for adolescent and teen girls. Presentations for these legal panels were made by Professors Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, Michelle Oberman, Katherine Hunt Federle, Emily Buss and myself. The articles written for these presentations are included in this issue of the Buffalo Law Review. In addition, the article by the Honorable Cindy S. Lederman and Eileen Nexer Brown was presented at a panel of judges developed in cooperation with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

In an effort to capture some of the dynamic exchange of the Conference, commentaries by teen writers on the academic articles and on the Conference generally are included in this issue following the presentation articles. These writers work with Youth Communications, Inc., a non-profit agency in New York City founded in 1980 to "train, inform and provide a voice to teens through print journalism." Their publications include the magazines Foster Care Youth United and New Youth Connections. Elvira Dzurlic, Anonymous, and Lishone Bowsky wrote commentaries on the issues presented in the articles by Oberman, Buss, and myself, respectively. Savita Droom and Sahara Walsh commented generally on the Conference, on some of the issues raised in the sessions, and on their own reactions.

Barbara Bennett Woodhouse led the legal panel discussions with her eloquent description of the issues captured by the lives of Dred Scott's daughters. Her article, Dred Scott's Daughters: Nineteenth Century Urban Girls at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Patriarchy opens the reader to the famous Dred Scott case through the forgotten experiences of his daughters. Their lives posed issues unique to their status as young, black, and female in the pre-Civil War era. At the Conference, and hopefully in this

issue, the retelling of the story through their lives provides an opportunity to reconsider familiar and novel stories through a refocused lens.

Michelle Oberman’s article *Regulating Consensual Sex with Minors: Defining a Role for Statutory Rape* provides an overview of current statutory rape laws and enforcement, while critiquing them and offering a reformed approach for the legal system. While supporting criminal sanctions for statutory rape, Professor Oberman offers suggestions for reform which place victim empowerment at the forefront.

Elvira Dzurlic, a writer for *Foster Care Youth United*, one of the magazines published by Youth Communications Inc., offers a personal account of statutory rape and the impact of its prosecution on her life and relationships. Her story both illustrates and challenges Professor Oberman’s description of the problem and needed reforms. Ms. Dzurlic eloquently relates her own experiences and the anger and ambivalence she felt during and after the prosecution. While her essay speaks loudly to the need for victim empowerment, since she was only twelve years old and the man charged as a defendant was twenty-four, the age discrepancy and result of the prosecution challenge both the current and reformed system as proposed by Professor Oberman.

Emily Buss’s article questions the disparity between the law’s treatment of minors as rightsholders generally and of minors holding parental rights as young parents. In *The Parental Rights of Minors*, Professor Buss discusses qualifications on children’s rights in areas such as abortion, marriage, voting and contracting, and the lack of limitations on the rights of minors to become parents or to exercise full parental rights. She applies the Supreme Court justifications for qualifying the constitutional rights of minors and concludes that they justify circumscribing minors’ parental rights. Despite this, there are no qualifications for minors to assume parental rights. Professor Buss offers some custody-shifting possibilities while urging attention to the legal rights of teen parents to lead to better outcomes for teen parents and their children.

Anonymous, a writer for *Foster Care Youth United*, criticizes panel discussions of teen pregnancy and parenting which focus too much on the teen parent and not on the child of the teen. She relates her own life experience while applying a broader critique to the Conference proceedings.
which challenges the focus on urban girls without fully considering the lives of children impacted by teen mothers.

In *Extending Non-Exclusive Parenting and the Right to Protection for Older Foster Children: Creating Third Options in Permanency Planning*, I describe the problems of teens who leave foster care because they are eighteen years old and no longer eligible. I summarize the federal laws governing foster care including the recent Adoption and Safe Families Act and Foster Care Independence Act. I opine that these do not adequately address the needs of older children in foster care. The article offers creative legal options to address the need for parental support for these teens and young adults.

Lishone Bowsky, a writer for *Foster Care Youth United*, describes some of her own experiences as a teen and young adult in foster care and critiques the reforms suggested in the Mangold article. Ms. Bowsky offers alternatives to meet the needs of older children in foster care and of those who have recently aged out of the system.

In *The Institutionalization of Female Delinquency*, Katherine Hunt Federle applies organizational theory to describe a juvenile justice system driven by its own bureaucracy to prosecute less serious cases when more serious cases are in decline. This fills the bureaucratic structure and keeps the juvenile courts functioning at a level which enhances their stability and legitimacy. Professor Federle sees this trend in the current system and discusses its negative impact on girls. She offers organizational theory as a way to understand the frequency and manner in which girls are processed in the juvenile justice system.

The Honorable Cindy S. Lederman and Eileen Nexer Brown, in *Entangled in the Shadows: Girls in the Juvenile Justice System*, describe the needs and experiences of girls charged with delinquency. Judge Lederman spoke on a panel developed with the assistance of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Judges. The article offers the Miami-Dade County Florida Girls Advocacy Project as an

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approach to focus attention and direct resources to girls in
the juvenile justice system. The project provides gender-
specific programming for girls while compiling much needed
research on girls in the juvenile justice system. It also offers
a model of community involvement in the often forgotten
world of youth delinquency and detention.

Savita Droom and Sahara Walsh are both writers for
New Youth Connections. Their commentaries challenge the
limits of the Conference and offer suggestions for future
conference planners to make the sessions more inclusive
and interactive. They discuss their reactions to some
specific panels while also describing their overall
Conference experience.

The articles and commentaries included in this
symposium issue only begin to document the exchange of
ideas at the Conference. It is hoped that the vital work of
the Conference in focusing on the unique issues of girls and
specifically of girls in urban settings will be remembered,
nurtured, and furthered by the ongoing exchange of ideas
prompted by this issue.