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RESPONSE TO THE URBAN GIRLS CONFERENCE
APRIL 14-15, 2000

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I'd have to say that the Urban Girls Conference was a very educational and informative experience. It opened my eyes to many of the grim realities that a lot of people, including myself, tend to push aside. After a while, we seem to become immune to what we hear on the news about young women being murdered or raped, or twelve-year-old girls having babies. Many of the panels at the Conference addressed such issues, and tried to develop strategies to tackle them.

But one thing about the Conference really bothered me. It seemed that most of the studies that were presented revolved around African-American, Latina and, to a lesser extent, white girls. "What about the other races that make up the United States, like Asians and Indians?" I asked myself during the sessions.

I live in a multicultural community in New York City, and go to a school with a large South-Asian and Guyanese population. I was disappointed to find that our experiences and perspectives did not get much attention at the Conference. I felt invisible throughout the weekend.

Personally, when I notice that my race isn't represented at events like this one, it makes me feel as if people like me do not count or are not interesting enough to be included. Asians and Indians often do live low-key lives, but that doesn't mean that we don't face the same obstacles in life that other races do. I sometimes feel that, since Indians are considered a "minority," white people just lump us in with blacks and Latinos. In other words, there are white people, and then there is everybody else, and as long as one non-white group is included, all of us should feel represented.

The concept of "one size fits all" is false—girls from different cultures face different problems in their families and communities. I do not think it is fair to group Asians, blacks and Latinos into one category—we all have our own

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distinct cultures. It is time for those of us who are “other” than white, and for Asians in particular, to speak out and represent ourselves—and to be recognized by the mainstream.

I did attend one session which addressed Asian domestic violence, and I found it to be highly informative. Professor Irene J. Kim of the University of California said that many issues concerning Asians have been ignored, especially Asian domestic violence. She also introduced the concept of “face”: how many Asian females fail to speak out about these issues because they’re afraid of tarnishing their reputation and jeopardizing their futures.

Professor Kim explained that Asian women who are victims of domestic violence often feel that breaking their silence would be shameful and degrading to themselves and their families. They also feel that the outside world does not care about their issues because of the cultural stereotype that says that Asian women are proper and flawless with no major problems in their lives. I felt that Professor Kim made a lot of good points, and I understood what she was saying because I live in a community and go to a school with many people who were raised to be very concerned with both “face,” and how their behavior will reflect on their families.

Another topic concerning Asian and Indian “urban girls” which I feel needs to be addressed is the way many girls in these communities are held back in life due to their parents’ strictness. Many Asian and Indian parents are old-fashioned, and still continue to live in the past. I know many girls my age who can’t even step outside their homes without adult supervision!

I feel sorry for these girls whose parents fail to realize that, by trying so hard to protect their daughters from the outside world, they are actually harming them. Parents can’t form a bubble around their children and protect them forever! As children, we fall and get hurt, but we get right back up. We learn from the painful experiences life throws at us.

It’s not that Asian parents don’t trust their children; they just don’t trust the outside world. They listen to the news and hear about children killing each other and kids having kids, and become afraid that their children will end up like that.

Many of the girls I know who live under such

restrictions rebel in the worst ways, and right under their parents' noses! Then, when these young women get into sticky situations due to their rebellion, they're too afraid to confide in their parents, and end up getting into even more trouble. The worst thing a parent can do is to be close-minded and rigid when laying down the rules, saying: "You can't do this and there's no if, ands, or buts!" because their children are just going to do the opposite of what they want them to do.

I believe it would be a great idea to educate parents (for a change) about how harmful the restrictions they put on their children's lives can be. Sometimes the effect is the exact opposite of what they intend.

In spite of my criticisms, I think the Conference was a great idea. It was encouraging to see that so many adults are trying to come up with strategies to solve or ease the problems facing urban girls. For example, one professor suggested programs that would educate teen mothers about childbirth, and then help them develop into good parents, to help them avoid falling into the stereotype of the "unfit" teenage mother.

I thought that this idea was great, but I wonder when and how it will be implemented. In the past, I have heard the same kind of proposal more than once without seeing any effective results. It is great to hear everyone say we need this-and-that to make improvements in girls' lives, but saying it is one thing and taking action is another. It takes a strong, educated group of people to actually follow through on these goals and make them realities. I believe that the ones who plant these ideas are responsible for making them grow. I hope these professors continue to plant their strategies, but also work to help these ideas grow into realities. Eventually, others will follow and help them grow.