

Vermont Women

Continued from page 1

All four women went to the conference with the expectation of networking with other women. "I guess for myself, I never had a lot of faith in official documents though I wanted to influence this one (the UN document on women's rights drawn up at the UN conference)," said Luhrs, "but for me, the thing was to go and network with other women." Isgro concurred, "(I) wanted to hear women's stories and celebrate women's lives."

Betgevargiz attended the conference as part of the Assyrian-American Federation and so her focus was on meeting other Middle Eastern women. For the first time, the conference had a workshop for Assyrian women at which they were able to express their concerns about surviving as Christians in fundamentalist Islamic countries such as Iraq, where they are indigenous people.

A lesbian dance was held in Beijing -- a first for China -- which was followed by a lesbian march. Nearly 400 lesbians marched and sang slogans, such as "Liberty, equality, homosexuality!" in English, French, and Spanish. Earlier that day, a group of approximately 30 fundamentalist Islamic women held a demonstration denouncing abortion and gay rights.



Luhrs had an encounter with a Chinese woman outside the lesbian tent who wondered about the meaning of the word "lesbian" and if it was a common word in English. Luhrs explained what it meant and that it is not only a common word in English, but has equivalents in other languages such as French and German. "Lesbian" does not exist in the Chinese language.

Overall, the reaction to the lesbian presence was positive with the exception of the Iranian government and the Vatican. Although many African women often debated whether homosexuality existed in their communities, many applauded during the lesbian march. A Lesbian and Bisexual Women Bill of Rights was drawn up and signed by women representing 47 countries as a means of letting delegates at the UN conference know about issues affecting the lesbian and bisexual communities. The document's demands include recognizing the "freedom to determine one's own sexuality as an inalienable human right and a necessary precondition for

equality, development, and peace;" recognizing and integrating the needs and concerns of women of all sexual orientations on the platform; directing government, non-government, and inter-government organizations to develop policies and programs based on the platform; and pledging a commitment to a concrete plan of action for women everywhere.

The message of the lesbians at the conference was that lesbian rights are women's rights which, in turn, are human rights. Speakers made the point that women are often the victims of economic forces, usually manipulated by multinational corporations and banking interests where money is often taken from women and children and given to the white males in power. In developing countries, this is called "structural readjustment;" in this country, the women said, "it's called welfare reform." Another concern was fundamentalist movements that force women into roles dictated by a patriarchal interpretation of religion or politics.

According to Luhrs, representatives of different cultures at the conference agreed that the abuse of women should not be tolerated in any culture. "They want respect," said Luhrs, "and to have their rights be human rights." Isgro discovered that women all over the world have the same concerns, "We're all working for equality at the same level." ▼

Gay youth and Vermont NEA

Cleland E. Selby

SPRINGFIELD -- "Gay kids are getting hurt bad!" according to Jeff Lavin, a teacher at Springfield High School. For the past few years Lavin and Marilyn Gillis, a teacher at Milton High School, have been responsible for Vermont National Education Association sponsored workshops focused upon g/l/b youth issues. Lavin and Gillis have devoted themselves to this cause, including trainings at national conferences, and bring to Vermont educators a passion for the issues g/l/b youth face in our society, most especially in their homes and their schools.

When asked about the obstacles Vermont teachers face when they advocate for gay youth, without hesitation Lavin responded with "people's religious convictions." One way Lavin helps teachers deal with this issue is by suggesting that teachers say, "Let's put the religious issues aside for just a moment and let's talk instead about how these kids are getting wiped out." Lavin stated that he sees his "role as a teacher to improve society. Had I taught in the 60s, the issue would have been civil rights. This is the civil rights issue of the 90s."

Lavin grew up in a Jewish family and has firsthand experience as a minority in his community and school. He readily acknowledges, however, that being Jewish and being gay are very different issues. Jewish kids have the protection of their Jewish family even if they live in a predominantly non-Jewish community. Gay youth do not have those protections and support systems. Lavin also provided statistical information about the "high risks" for gay youth in schools today -- illegal drugs and alcohol, suicide, homelessness, and low self-esteem.

Lavin's and Gillis' workshops have been well attended, reflecting the growing concern among some school professionals about the hatefulness that many g/l/b youth endure in their homes, their schools, and their communities. ▼

Don't forget your rubbers.

You don't get it from toilet seats.
 You don't get it from coffee cups. You don't get it from desk tops in a school room.
 It doesn't fly through the air or swim around in hot tubs.
 You don't catch it from shaking hands, kissing, sneezing, wrestling or dancing.

According to the Surgeon General, your best protection against AIDS, barring abstinence, is use of a condom.
 For the facts about AIDS, call the Vermont AIDS Hotline.

VERMONT AIDS HOTLINE: 1-800-882-AIDS
 ©1987, State Department of Health, Division of Epidemiology,
 60 Main Street, P.O. Box 70, Burlington, Vermont 05402