

PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION

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SYMPOSIUM ON CHILDREN  
OF THE AMERICAS-FLORIDA

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON  
REMARKS FOR THE FIRST LADIES' SYMPOSIUM ON  
CHILDREN OF THE AMERICAS  
MIAMI, FLORIDA  
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Welcome to all of my colleagues and friends from across the Americas, and to all of our distinguished guests.

It is an honor and privilege for me to host this wonderful symposium here in Miami. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the First Ladies of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada for your help and guidance in preparing for this session. Your extraordinary efforts in previous First Ladies' meetings in Colombia, Costa Rica, and most recently in St. Lucia, have provided a foundation for all of our work -- today and into the future.

I hope that in the course of our gathering here, and in the weeks and months ahead, we will learn much from each other and find new inspiration to address the needs of children, families, and women across our hemisphere.

Today, we live in an age of great promise -- and great peril -- for the 130 million children of the Americas. Great promise because our children are our lifeline to prosperity and democracy in the decades ahead. And we all take pleasure in knowing that there are millions of happy, healthy children across the Americas whose futures are filled with hope.

But there are perils too, because from the Queen Elizabeth Islands to Tierra del Fuego, our children are shouldering burdens rarely encountered by older generations.

Children suffering from hunger, poverty, homelessness, inadequate health care, disease, illiteracy, violence, and abuse are not confined to a single nation or a single continent. The cries of desperate children are sadly heard in every nation represented here. And it is the plight of those children that brings us together today, not just as the spouses of heads of state or as representatives of our governments, but as mothers, sisters, daughters, grandmothers, aunts, neighbors and friends who believe that every child in every country deserves a fair chance in life.

The political leaders convening at this historic summit have set forth an agenda to promote prosperity and democracy throughout the hemisphere through trade initiatives, sustainable development, and more effective government.

Today, summit leaders are outlining goals to ensure the economic, social and physical well-being of children, which Dr. Alleyne will outline later in greater detail:

The proposed Summit Plan of Action calls for universal access to education so that all children, regardless of economic or social status, racial or ethnic origin, or gender, will receive the basic tools necessary to become full members of society. The goal of requiring children to attend and complete primary school is also under discussion. If this goal is achieved, it will help eradicate child labor and give children a greater hope of acquiring the skills and knowledge needed in a modern global economy.

Beyond the important issue of school attendance, the Summit initiative on education also addresses the nutritional needs of children so they can learn more effectively.

The proposed Summit Plan of Action calls for equitable access to basic health services, which will be particularly beneficial to children, who are most vulnerable to illnesses and unhealthy living conditions.

Specific programs being recommended will address child, infant, and maternal mortality rates, as well as increasing immunization efforts to eradicate childhood diseases, such as measles, that still afflict too many children. We need only look to the disappearance of new polio cases in the Western hemisphere to know the success of these immunization programs.

We all know that the role of caregiver is crucial to the development of healthy and secure children. And we all know that the primary caregivers in society most often are women. The Summit proposal to strengthen the role of women will increase opportunities for women to participate in all spheres of life -- political, social, and economic.

Empowering women with economic self-reliance, access to quality health care and education is not only a valuable step forward in itself. It's an important step forward for children.

While we recognize that our political leaders are responsible for devising policies and programs to meet these important goals, we also know that, as First Ladies, we have a significant role to play.

Just as advocacy organizations, social institutions, and dedicated individuals are critical to progress, we, too, can help push the agenda forward in our respective countries.

When it comes to children's issues, women have a special calling. And that's why we have a duty to raise our voices for

the voiceless -- our children, the youngest and most vulnerable among us.

This week I've had particular reason to think about the difference one woman alone can make on behalf of children, even against extraordinary odds. My friend, Elizabeth Glaeser, died last weekend after losing a long battle with AIDS.

Elizabeth contracted HIV through a blood transfusion while hemorrhaging during the delivery of her first child, Ariel. Unbeknownst to her, her daughter, and then a son born later, also contracted the virus.

When Elizabeth learned that she and her children had been infected with HIV, she dedicated herself to raising awareness about AIDS. From a small office in Los Angeles, she created the Pediatric AIDS Foundation, which has raised over \$30 million since its founding in 1988.

Elizabeth often said she was motivated and strengthened by the memory of her daughter, who died four years ago at the age of seven. Her son, now 10, lives with HIV every day.

If Elizabeth could continue to contribute so much on behalf of children throughout her own illness, I know we can make our own contributions too. Of course, we will not all be involved in the same ways, or even on precisely the same issues. I know, for example, that AIDS is not as prevalent in many of your countries as it is in mine. That's why each of us must find a venue appropriate to our own situation as First Lady or government representative. But whatever role we choose represents a rare opportunity to make a difference in the lives of tens of millions of children -- and in the future of all of the Americas.

There is an urgency to our mission. More than half of our population in this hemisphere is under age 23. Ushering children into the world is, of course, the province of families. But building safe and nurturing communities for them to grow up in . . . making sure they have access to schools that teach them to read and write . . . protecting them from avoidable diseases . . . training them for productive adulthoods. . . and honoring their rights in the face of violence and abuse -- these are our collective responsibilities.

This concept was eloquently expressed in a pastoral letter issued in the United States several years ago by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. In that letter, entitled *Putting Children and Families First*, the bishops said:

"No government can love a child, and no policy can substitute for a family's care. But, government can either support or undermine families. There has been an unfortunate,

unnecessary and unreal polarization in [the] discussion [of] how best to help families. The undeniable fact is that our children's future is shaped both by the values of their parents and the policies of our nation."

As adults, we must take responsibility for our children so that they can learn to take responsibility for themselves. And we must insist that society's most vital institutions -- family, school, and church -- create the conditions necessary for our children to fulfill all their God-given potential.

To be sure, our challenges differ from country to country, and our recipes for progress may require different ingredients. The purpose of this gathering is not to prescribe one solution, but to share ideas and opinions and learn from each other's experiences.

Here in the United States, for example, we are not doing enough to ensure that women receive adequate pre- and post-natal health care, particularly poor women and teenagers. In 1992, 22 percent of pregnant women in this country received no pre-natal care.

As the rest of the world knows all too well, my nation faces significant challenges in stopping an epidemic of gun violence that daily claims the lives of children in our cities and towns. Today, homicide is the leading cause of death for African American youth in the United States and violence is the second leading cause of death for youngsters between the ages of 10 and 14.

Combined with violence is an equally disturbing scourge of narcotics use among our young people. Illegal drugs are readily available in too many communities in the United States, and even in some of our schools. Studies show that as many as seven million children abuse alcohol and drugs to some extent

At the same time, we are making progress on behalf of some of our children -- progress that is visible right here in Miami. Just yesterday I had the opportunity to visit Jackson Memorial Hospital and Drew Elementary School -- two institutions that have achieved remarkable successes in disadvantaged communities.

Jackson Memorial Medical Center, which is affiliated with the University of Miami, has the difficult task of caring for some of the poorest and neediest residents of this city. The newborn intensive care unit that I visited yesterday serves the highest risk population in Dade County -- but the hospital has achieved the lowest infant mortality rates in the state.

The hospital also has devised innovative ways of serving its community. A mobile van brings doctors and nurses to those who

might otherwise go without necessary treatment and care.

Drew Elementary School is located in a predominantly African-American neighborhood. Community leaders devised a cultural exchange program in which students from Drew and a predominantly Hispanic school called Seminole Elementary come together for a variety of activities that promote tolerance and understanding. To enhance communication across cultures, students at Drew take Spanish from the second grade on.

The positive educational climate at Drew is reflected in the student attendance rate: 95 percent of the school's students come to class every day.

Drew has succeeded because parents, teachers, the school principal and community leaders have worked hard to create an environment where children feel safe, secure, and confident that they will thrive. The adults have taken responsibility; and the children are learning to take responsibility as well.

In every one of our nations, dedicated, energetic, and caring people are battling on the front lines to solve some of society's most vexing problems. The purpose of this gathering is to educate each other about our challenges and our successes -- and to make our efforts more cooperative by sharing the knowledge and experience each of us holds within us.

When we return to our capitals, I hope we will not be guided solely by documents, policy papers, and official pronouncements, but also by the desire in our hearts to see that all children have the gift of hope in their lives.

In the words of Gabriela Mistral [Mee-strall], the visionary Chilean educator, poet, and Nobel prize winner for literature: "Let me be more maternal than a mother; able to love and defend with all of a mother's fervor the child that is not flesh of my flesh."

As she once said: "Many things we need can wait. The child cannot . . . To him, we cannot say tomorrow. His name is today."

Thank you for coming to Miami, and for joining together in this important cause.

And now, let us go from words to deeds.

[Introduce UNICEF video]

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