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THE WOMEN & UN
CONFERENCE TRUSTESHIP
COUNCIL CHAMBER

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
ADDRESSING THE
WOMEN AND THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE
TRUSTEESHIP COUNCIL CHAMBER
THE UNITED NATIONS
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Thank you so much, Amb. Albright, for that introduction, and for your friendship and your leadership. Amb. vanden Heuvel and officers of the Roosevelt Institute, members of the Group on Equal Rights for Women at the United Nations and the United Nations Association of the United States of America. Excellencies, senior officials of the United Nations, and the United Nations staff and representatives of NGOs and many friends.

It is a great personal privilege for me to join you at this Conference on Women and the United Nations. It is held in conjunction with the celebration of International Women's Day which we celebrated, some of us together, last week in Copenhagen. It comes at a time when the role of women around the world deserves renewed attention. It is a special honor for those of us in the United States that this conference is dedicated to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Last week, when I was lucky enough to be in Copenhagen, I had the opportunity to meet with men and women around the world who had

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gathered there who are devoting their lives to the goals of eradicating poverty, protecting human rights and integrating marginalized groups into mainstream society. All of these issues disproportionately effect women, and for that reason, I, and many others, came away from Copenhagen even more convinced that we must work harder for ways to open opportunities to woman so they may play a central role in helping find solutions for their own lives.

At a time when full economic, social and political opportunities for women too often remain an elusive goal we should commend the United Nations for inviting serious discussion of the unique obstacles confronting women in every country, rich and poor. With the work of the world conferences in Rio, Vienna, in Cairo and Copenhagen we have helped the world elucidate the specific challenges posed to our global community and with Beijing on the horizon issues historically dismissed as unimportant may now be understood in a larger global context. It is my hope that through this conference today, and the ongoing work of the United Nations, the special barriers that women face in becoming full partners in society will be viewed with greater urgency, honesty and insight.

As others have noted, it is impossible to think about the history of the United Nations, or the role of women in the United Nations, without thinking of Eleanor Roosevelt. I happen to be a great admirer of Mrs. Roosevelt, so I am doubly pleased that we are remembering her contributions today and I hope will continue as we celebrate the anniversary of the United Nations.

So much of what she accomplished as a delegate to the UN, and throughout her life, is instructive to us today. Not only as women, but because all of us as human beings at the end of the Cold War face new opportunities and challenges. It is easy at times like these when we see so many nations confused and struggling about their own futures, wasting precious resources on building weapons of mass destruction, doing violence to basic human rights, to assume that collective global solutions exist only in the realm of fantasy. And it is equally easy to assign blame for all of the worlds problems to one group of nations or another and to assume that the political and cultural divides among us are too wide to overcome. If anything, we should be reminded that every generation every time in history faces its

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own special challenges. And instead of giving into the frustration of the time or to a sense of futility we need only think of leaders like Eleanor Roosevelt who always for me provides inspiration and incentive to carry forward no matter what the odds.

Even before she came to the United Nations her efforts to help those in need, those less fortunate were unparalleled. She spoke up on behalf of Japanese Americans detained in this country during World War II. The civil rights of American blacks was a special cause for her. Migrant workers, coal miners, the poor and dispossessed, anyone who did not have a voice was someone for whom she spoke. Anywhere she came across human suffering she was determined to do something about it.

When she came to the United Nations there were many who dismissed her arrival. They thought she came as a token, the widow of a great President, and she faced considerable personal challenges in undertaking the work she did. We know from various histories and from Mrs. Roosevelt's own writing that she was dismissed by a number of her fellow male delegates and in fact assigned to a committee where they said she could do no harm. She was assigned to the Third Committee: the Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian Committee. Apparently assigned by men who had no idea what she was capable of doing. She made from the very beginning it her mission to insure that that committee, which deals so directly with the stuff of life, was one that had a very important portfolio. We also know that she was alternately perplexed and amused by what she viewed as an obsession with rule making among her male peers. As the men around here would sometimes argue for hours over matters that Mrs. Roosevelt felt did not deserve minutes of conversation, she would sit and knit.

It turned out to be not only a controversial job for her but one that took tremendous diplomatic skill. Among her critics was the very powerful American John Foster Dulles. Who at the end of the Assembly did finally say to her and I quote "I must tell you that when you were appointed I thought it terrible, and now I think your work has been fine." She wrote about her reaction to that statement in a letter home, and I quote, "so against the odds the women inch forward." I read her response with mixed feeling. Yes, I say to myself, the women inch forward. Oh dear, I say to myself, we still are inching forward and I wish we had more to

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show for those inches than sometimes we do.

Her role within the Assembly, although sometimes not welcome, and certainly never easy, was very important. She out worked most of her colleagues. She did turn that Third Committee into one of the most important of the entire Assembly. She became instrumental in decisions about the fate of refugees. And she negotiated over many very sensitive issues with a great deal of success.

Her greatest achievement, as we all know, was to help persuade 55 nations to sign a bill of human rights, something that had never been done before. Even with her successes she was under no illusions about the capacity of this organization, or any government body or agency, to effect change on its own. The United Nations she said soon after its founding, is "a piece of machinery and the peoples of the world have to make it work. You make it work by what you do in your own communities, by the things you build there which spread out through your representatives into your national government".

That observation by Mrs. Roosevelt holds special weight today when all nations are grappling with a range of human problems at a time of shrinking resources and increased global competition. There is no panacea, no magic bullet that will suddenly empower women or free people from the bondage of inhuman living conditions. Progress depends on our working together in partnership to create conditions around the world that enable women, men and children to reach their God given potentials and flourish within their own families and societies. But today, perhaps even more than in Mrs. Roosevelt's time, there is a special urgency to helping women around the world assume their rightful places in society. That is because the fortunes of our women are inextricably tied to the fortunes of our global community. If women don't thrive the world won't thrive. At least in words we tend to agree that women should be active participants in helping their societies meet the great challenges of this and the next century. But that can only be achieved through real concrete actions. Actions that empower women through education, legal rights and protection from violence. And actions that assure women access to adequate social services, employment opportunities, political institutions and decision

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making.

We know that investing in women in their health and education is essential to improving global prosperity. And we know that investing in women so that they can assume their rightful places in decision making bodies is essential to continued democracy and prosperity as well. The United Nations must play a leadership role and must play a role by example. Every program, policy and decision that emanates from this building directly or indirectly affects women. Women as they care for children, manage households and work at their jobs. Women must be a part of the process within the United Nations as we search for answers and women must continue to demand that their rights and opportunities be respected in nations around the world.

If one looks at among Mrs. Roosevelt's great accomplishments certainly the Bill of Human Rights continues to challenge all of us. Although international humanitarian law had been evolving before the United Nations, human rights in general and women's rights in particular, were not widely recognized. On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly adopted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Eleanor Roosevelt played a major role in the drafting and adoption.

Now Mrs. Roosevelt originally opposed the language in the Declaration seeking specific rights for women. But through her work in human rights she changed her position and she embraced the idea that women deserve the same rights of men and that it must be made articulate and explicit. Because of Mrs. Roosevelt's opinion on this matter in the fifth paragraph of that resolution the words "and women" were added. So that the paragraph reads, "were as the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women, and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom".

Those words have enabled us to move the agenda of the United Nations forward throughout the Women's conferences, they will give us the kind of platform we need in Beijing to talk about how we move forward to enable women to assume their rightful places in all societies and they should serve as a reminder here within the United Nations that we are far from having women in enough

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decision making positions here in this body either. When only 15% of the Secretariat are women that is a long way from the assumption that Mrs. Roosevelt had that women will be able in the years to come after 1948 to assume those positions. She was disappointed that more nations had not dispatched women to serve as delegates because she recognized that in these positions women could effectively work for equality. I think she would still be disappointed and surprised that we have not made very much progress since those early years and certainly the United Nations which has done such important and essential work in opening up the eyes of the world to the concept of human rights and in emphasizing the particular needs of women should serve as an example to the rest of the world.

In paying tribute to Eleanor Roosevelt, as part of this conference, we would do well to consider her great vision, her compassion and her common sense approach to solving very difficult human problems. For her no political obstacle was too large, no cultural gap was too wide, no difference of opinion was too serious to overcome. And as Amb. Albright has reminded us, no controversy was to be avoided. One of my favorite quotations from Mrs. Roosevelt is that she often said her work was to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Certainly those of us, women and men together, who share the vision of the United Nations who know the work the United Nations has done over the last 50 years who can point to its successes bear an even greater burden to make sure that we continue to do what we can to insure that the United Nations itself lives up to its own aspirations and that it continues to be a strong voice for all of those who needs must be heard by the rest of the world.

The important thing Mrs. Roosevelt said was to go on working and growing in understanding. If we follow that one piece of advice our world will be better for it and I believe the United Nations has a major role in insuring that we do. Thank you all very much.