

Conference on Women
8/8/95

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

HRC REMARKS AT BREAKFAST FOR DELEGATES TO 4TH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN - AUGUST 8, 1995

It's great to have you here, in the beautiful Indian Treaty Room. I apologize; I'd hoped to have you all over in the house, but it is public tour time, and there is no way we could fit this large a group without disrupting the tours. And so I'm very sorry. If any of you have not had a tour of the White House, let me know and we will fix that forthwith.

This is an extraordinary group of people. I hope you all know that about yourselves and about each other. And it is so exciting for me to stand here and look out at all of you and know what extraordinary leadership you are going to bring to this effort.

I believe strongly that this Fourth World Conference on Women holds great promise. And I believe that that promise can be at least partially fulfilled because of United States leadership. Many of you are here because of your various capacities in the private sector or the not-for-profit world. You have stood for the proposition that we all have a say in how women and girls are treated and how they are able to lead their lives throughout the world. We have to, in this country, recognize that many of the [] issues that will be discussed at the conference are ones that also have continuing relevance for our women and girls as well. We are not going to make a distinction between "those women" and "our women" I hope, but instead try to bring together all women's interests and issues so that their common experiences and needs can be understood and pursued.

There are issues about how to provide educational opportunity, how do we ensure access to the full range of health services that women need, how do we provide incentives and income-generating activities for women and how do we ensure women's full political participation in their societies? All of those are issues for us, as well as people in other parts of the world.

We also have a great stake in promoting a human rights agenda that does not marginalize women's rights. I have said, over and over again, that women's rights are human rights. They are not distinguishable and we should stop treating them as if they were.

So with respect to the issues that we believe are most relevant to what will happen in the next ten, twenty, thirty years on behalf of women, we come out with very strong opinions, based on the American experience, a willingness to learn and

listen from other experiences, but I hope, with a very strong commitment to making common ground.

Our overall message should be one that focuses on women as agents of change, as active and full participants in their societies, as people being able to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. Therefore I think it is critical for the United States to lead, and to give leadership not only at the Conference, but afterwards and into the future. This is something that I feel very strongly about, it is certainly something that the President feels strongly about and obviously all of you do as well.

When I had my marvelous trip to South Asia with my daughter, I was impressed over and over again at the ways that women [] were taking control, step by step, over their own lives. I think that's contagious, if we are agents of that contagion. I think that if we continue to speak out for women's rights, everywhere, the lessons that I saw being acted out in places like India and Bangladesh will spread. And I saw that when I went to Denver recently and visited a project which is working to provide women on welfare with an equal amount of opportunity and the skills to pursue them, I felt as though I had been transported back to that village in Bangladesh where I listed to women say that they were going to take power over their own lives, that they were going to make a better life for themselves and their children, that they were going to overcome the obstacles that they confronted. Being brave enough in India or Bangladesh to send a daughter to school, being brave enough in Pakistan to seek family planning assistance, being brave enough to stand in the long lines that are often necessary to obtain the services one needs for oneself and one's family, is all part of what we want to focus on. And I think we have a great opportunity to continue educating the American public about what women and girls are up against around the world and draw some analogies with our situation back here at home.

Because this conference gives us the platform not only to play the leadership role that I know we will play, but also to communicate more practically with women back here in the United States. This is, after all, the seventy-fifth anniversary year of women having won the right to vote in America. We will be celebrating that about a week before the conference begins in Beijing. It is a sense of deja-vu all over again, to some extent, to go back and read some of the comments and speeches that early suffrage leaders gave, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. And it is also a sense of disappointment, when we realize that many of us have not been willing to take advantage of even the most fundamental right, that is the right to vote in our own country. So much of what I see coming out of this conference and the months following it is to try to recreate some sense of mission and commitment in the lives of women and girls. Even if we are only able to increase the percentage of women who vote in the next election, even that to me is a

significant step in women being willing to take responsibility for themselves.

We also hope to build on the previous commitments made at United Nations Conferences at Rio and Vienna, at Cairo and Copenhagen. These have been very important conferences. They have outlined significant steps that societies are willing to take and should be pressured to take on behalf of men, women and children. So we will be doing all we can with respect to the previous commitments that the United States have signed on to; to affirm those, and to use them as a base upon which whatever comes out of Beijing can be constructed.

It is critical, for example, that we focus on a life cycle approach to health and the whole range of health concerns that women - including reproductive health, but making it clear that that is part of the overall life cycle of women. If little girls, in many parts of the world, are denied medical assistance, so that they die at a disproportionately higher rate because if they make it to infancy they are not taken care of, that is a serious health issue. If women are not given the kind of assistance that they need with both pregnancy and the other diseases that may affect their reproductive cycle as well as diseases that may interfere with their whole [] that is a health issue.

So there are many people who wish to discount this Conference or purposefully mischaracterize it - that is nothing new, that happens about ten times an hour in Washington - and it is part of our job to make it clear that being for women and girls is neither being against men and boys, nor is it being against families. Those are the most absurd, shop-worn arguments that the far Right always digs up and throws at us whenever we start talking about women and girls. If we were to have a meeting about men and boys, you would not hear that. So it is part of our responsibility to make very clear that this Conference is, yes, about women and girls, in part to give women the tools they need to be fully functioning members of their own families, their neighborhoods, their communities and their societies. And I think we should be very strong in stating that position over and over again. And I am tired of people who have done nothing to promote the rights and responsibilities of women and girls in this country, let alone around the world, and try to act as though those of us who care about the future of our daughters and our granddaughters and ourselves are in some way undermining some utopian ideal that never existed.

We also take human rights issues very seriously. As Madeline Albright said last week in Congress - something that should not have needed to be said - it is precisely because we do take human rights seriously in this administration that we must be in Beijing, with a strong and active voice. So this is a very important effort to have, to take part in. We're delighted not only that you are going to be in Beijing, but also to implement

the platform for action by relating the messages that come out of Beijing to millions of Americans.

This is not a partisan issue. I don't think, as I've said many times before, that education and health care are Republican or democrat, conservative or liberal. It is human. It is an issue that every one of us should do all we can to ensure we and those we love have access to, so we should start trying to expand those opportunities to all women and girls.

So I hope that as we prepare for this Conference, and as each of you thinks about your own participation and the role you will play, that you will also consider how to get the message out more effectively here at home. So this becomes not only a conference that has an impact, but one instead that has a wide-ranging, rippling effect, that has a life of its own and continues to grow and take root here in America and around the world.

I have told women that I have talked with around the world that what I would love to see come out of Beijing is a one page document - I don't care if there is a nine hundred page document behind it. But a one page document that in very clear language states the kind of agenda for change that every single woman can understand, that can then be translated into as many languages as we possibly could achieve to be used as an organizational tool in communities throughout the world. Obviously, it would be simple, but they are simple matters that we should be focused on. Matters of access to education and health care, full participation of women. That itself could be a revolutionary statement, and a revolutionary plan of action, if it were achieved. Other people can spend their time doing an exegesis of every comma and period; that is for people who have no interest in the agenda of change, but rather try to block it.

What I want to see is something very clearly stated, that every single one of us can use, could fold up, and could see make a difference in people's lives. It would be something like the sixteen principles of the Grameen bank, which some of you know so well. They range from the very practical - "we will build and use pit latrines" - to the very difficult and challenging - "we will not let dowry enter into our marriage relations of our children" - to the extraordinary idealistic - that we will become self-sufficient and make a difference in our lives and our families'. That is what I hope will come out of Beijing - something that is clear, unequivocal, and serves as a basis for action. And I'm delighted that all of you will be part of this conference and part of making this message known throughout the world. Thank you very much.