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9/6/95
NGO FORUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 6, 1995

**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
to the NGO Forum
Huairou, China**

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you so much. I feel so much at home and so much a part of this group. I only wish that in addition to the enthusiasm and interest among all of the Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) who are gathered here, the weather had been more cooperative this morning and I greatly regret that we were forced to move this occasion indoors in order to avoid any of us drowning out there. I am very sorry that not everyone who wished to be with us this morning was able to, and I hope all of you will convey my personal regrets to anyone who was turned away or disappointed because of the size of this auditorium.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here, and I want to start by thanking Supatra and Irene for their leadership in this extraordinary and historic enterprise.

But I also want to thank all of you who are here, because I know from looking at the lists of people who have come, from knowing personally many of the Americans who have come, that in this auditorium and at this Forum, there are thousands and thousands of women and men who every day work to make life better in their communities for all people. And that is the greatest contribution any one of us is able to make, and that is why the United States and many other countries so strongly support the efforts of NGOs and have worked very hard to ensure that NGOs could participate in this Forum.

As many of you know, our government and other governments recognize the important role that NGOs play in policy and planning, in development and implementation and monitoring of programs that advance the progress of women.

I have come here, to Huairou, to salute you for your dedication to a cause greater than all of us. I know that many of you went to great efforts to be here. I know many were kept from attending this Forum. I know that for many of you who did get here, getting here was far from easy. Many of you did not even know until the last minute that you would be permitted to travel

here, and others bore great personal expense in order to come.

In addition to the weather, which is not in anyone's control, and is always unpredictable, I know that you have had to endure severe frustrations here as you have pursued your work. And I also want to say a special word on behalf of women with disabilities who have faced particular challenges.

But I mostly want to thank you for your perseverance, because you did not give up, you did not stay away, you are here, and the fact that you are, will make a difference in the days and months and years to come. Because even though you may not be physically present in Beijing at the Conference during these ten days, the wisdom that is accumulated here, the experience, the energy, the ideas are on full display.

Thanks to your resourcefulness, your tenacity, your sense of purpose and your spirit, you are playing an important role in this Conference, and you will be the key players in determining whether or not this Conference goes beyond rhetoric and actually does something to improve the lives of women and children.

As I said yesterday, the faces of the women who are here mirror the faces of the millions and millions who are not. It is our responsibility, those of us who have been able to attend this Conference and this NGO Forum, to make sure that the voices that go unheard will be heard. This Conference is about making sure that women, their children, their families, have the opportunities for health care and education, for jobs and political participation, for lives free of violence, for basic legal protections, and yes, for internationally recognized human rights no matter where they are or where they live.

Time and time again we have seen that it is NGOs who are responsible for making progress in any society. Some of us never knew we were NGOs twenty and twenty-five and thirty years ago. That was not even a phrase that any of us had ever heard. We were people working together on behalf of all of those rights which we care about and hold dear. But when one looks at the progress that has been made throughout the world, it is clear that it is the NGOs who have charted real advances for women and children.

It is the NGOs who have pressured governments and have led governments down the path to economic, social, and political progress, often in the face of overwhelming hostility. Again, NGOs have persevered, just as you have by coming here and staying here and participating in this Forum.

What will be important as we end the Forum and the Conference at the end of this week is that it will be NGOs who will hold governments to the commitments that they make. And it is important that the final Platform for Action that is adopted

be distilled into words that every woman, no matter where she lives, or how much education she has, can understand. I think we should want every woman, no matter where she is, to believe that there are women all over the world who care about her health, who want her children to be educated, who want her to have the dignity and respect that she deserves to have.

When I think of the faces that I have seen in my own country, when I think of the women who did not have health care because they cannot afford it in the United States of America, when I think particularly of a woman I met in New Orleans, Louisiana, who told me that because she did not have enough money she was told by physicians there in our country, that they would not do anything about the lump in her breast, but would merely wait and watch, while if she had insurance she would have been sent to a surgeon. I think about the woman I met in a village outside Lahore, Pakistan, who had ten children, five boys and five girls, and was struggling as hard as she could to make sure her girls were educated and wanted help to get that job done.

I think of the faces of the beautiful women I met at SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association, in India. All of them had walked miles and miles, some of them for twelve and fifteen hours to get to our meeting together, and I listened as they stood up and told me what it had meant that for the first time in their lives, they had a little money of their own. They could buy their own vegetable carts. They could buy their own thread and materials so that they could make income for themselves and their families.

I think of the women in a village in Bangladesh, a village of untouchables—women were Hindus—who invited to their village for my visit Moslem women from the neighboring village. I think of how those women sat together under a lean-to—Hindus and Moslems together in one of the poorest countries of the world, but so many of those women telling me how their lives had been changed because they had become borrowers and were now part of the Grameen Bank microenterprise effort.

I think particularly of the play that their children put on for me to see, a play in which the children acted out the refusal by a family to let a girl child go to school. And then further down the road from that village, I stood and watched families coming to receive food supplements in return for keeping their girl children in school.

Those are the kinds of women and experiences that happen throughout the world, whether one talks about my country or any country. Women are looking for the support and encouragement they need to do what they can for their own lives and the lives of their children and the lives of their families. The only way this Conference will make a difference to these women is if the

results of the Conference are taken and distilled to a minimal number of easily read pages which state the basic principles. When that is done, the message can be carried into every corner of the world where women will recognize and exchange shared experiences.

When I came home from Bangladesh, I visited in Denver, Colorado, a program that is modeled on the Grameen Bank, helping American women who are welfare recipients get the dignity and the skills that they need to take care of themselves and their children.

So despite all of the difficulties and frustrations you have faced in coming here and being here, you are here not only on behalf of yourselves, but on behalf of millions and millions of women whose lives can be changed for the better. Let us all resolve to leave this place and do what we can together to make the changes that will give respect and dignity to every woman.

I know that today at the women's conference there is a special celebration of girls. The theme is: "Investing in Today's Girls, Tomorrow's Women, and the Future." We know that much of what we do, we are doing not for ourselves, but we are doing for our daughters, our nieces, our granddaughters. We are doing it because we have the hope that the changes we work for will take root and flower in their lives.

When I was privileged to be in New Delhi, India, I met a young woman who I think spoke for many, many women, and someone asked me yesterday at the Conference if I had a copy of the poem which this young woman wrote. I said that I did and she asked if I could read it today, and I said that I would. This was a poem about breaking the silence, the silence that afflicts too many women's lives, the silence that keeps women from expressing themselves freely, from being full participants even in the lives of their own families. This poem written by a young woman, I think, is particularly appropriate since we are celebrating today the future of girls. Let me read it to you:

Too many women
in too many countries
speak the same language.
Of silence.
My grandmother was always silent—
always aggrieved—
only her husband had the cosmic right,
(or so it was said)
to speak and to be heard.
They say it is different now.
(After all, I am always vocal
and my grandmother thinks
I talk too much)
But sometimes I wonder.

When a woman gives her love, as most women do, generously—
it is accepted. When a woman shares her thoughts,
as some women do, graciously—
it is allowed.

When a woman fights for power,
as all women would like to,
quietly or loudly,
it is questioned.

And yet, there must be freedom—
if we are to speak.

And yes, there must be power—
if we are to be heard.

And when we have both
(freedom and power)
let us not be misunderstood.

We seek only to give words
to those who cannot speak
(too many women
in too many countries)
I seek only to forget
the sorrows of my grandmother's
silence.

That is the kind of feeling that literally millions and
millions of women feel every day. And much of what we are doing
here at this Forum and at this Conference is to give words to
break the silence and then to act.

When I was at Copenhagen for the Summit on Social
Development, I was pleased to announce that the United States
would make an effort to enhance educational opportunities for
girls so that they could attend school in Africa, Asia, and Latin
America. Today that effort, funded with United States' dollars,
is being organized in countries throughout those continents by
NGOs.

There are so many ways we can work together. There are so
many things that must be done. And let me just end with a
postcard that I received from a woman who, with many, many
others, wrote me her feelings and thoughts about this Conference.
I don't know this woman, but she wrote to tell me that she wanted
me to carry this card to Beijing. And she went on to say, "Be
assured of many prayers for the success of the Conference, to
better conditions for women and children throughout the world."

She put on this card a prayer and the prayer was written in
many languages. It's a prayer that applies and can be said by
many, if not all of the world's religions. I want to end with
that because I think that in many respects what we are attempting
to do requires the kind of faith and commitment that this prayer

represents:

Oh God, Creator of the heavens and the earth, we pray for all who gather in Beijing. Bless them. Help them and us to see one another through eyes enlightened by understanding and compassion. Release us from prejudice so we can receive the stories of our sisters with respect and attention. Open our ears to the cries of a suffering world and the healing melodies of peace. Empower us to be instruments in bringing about Your justice and equality everywhere.

That is my prayer as well, and with my thanks to all of you I believe we can take the results of this Forum and this Conference and begin to translate them into actions that will count, in the lives of girls and women who will have never heard of what we have done here, but whose lives can be changed because of what you have done by coming here.

Thank you all very much.

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