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**REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
AT THE FIFTH CONFERENCE OF WIVES OF HEADS OF STATE AND OF
GOVERNMENTS OF THE AMERICAS
ASUNCION, PARAGUAY**

MRS. CLINTON: I am privileged to have the opportunity to represent my country, the United States, for the first time at this Fifth Conference of First Ladies from the Western Hemisphere. It is also a great honor for me to be here in Paraguay with all of you.

We have gathered together to discuss the futures of women and children in all of our countries. Whether we live in North, Central, or South America or the Caribbean region, we are united in our belief that women everywhere share common aspirations and concerns.

Yet, as we meet here in this beautiful hall this evening, we also know that a vast reservoir of human potential is now being wasted across the Americas.

No nation in our hemisphere can say that all of its children are fed, clothed, housed, schooled, and raised by loving parents. No nation in our hemisphere can say that all of its women are treated with dignity, respect, and given the chance to fulfill their God-given potentials. And no nation can say that each and every family within its borders is healthy, strong, and stable.

Our world, as we know, is far from perfect. But even though enormous challenges remain, we have come here hopeful about our future. Hopeful because, somewhere in our hemisphere right now, a baby in a local health clinic is being immunized against a serious disease. . . a little girl is going to school and is learning to read and write . . . a woman is taking out a small loan from a neighborhood bank that will enable her to start her own business in her home. We know that every problem we face in our hemisphere is being solved somewhere in our region at this very moment.

We are also hopeful because of the progress made at last year's Summit of the Americas in Miami, at the United Nations Conference on Social Development in Copenhagen earlier this year, and more recently at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on

Women in Beijing. I think it is very fitting that we meet after those three historic gatherings, which drew world attention to the plight of women and children and, in so doing, to the plight of families as well.

Since Miami, we have seen cooperation grow among our nations, and our political leaders. The Summit not only recognized every nation's duty to invest in its people, but also the special role that girls and women play in the economic and social development of the Western Hemisphere.

That theme was reiterated again in Copenhagen, which focused on the alleviation of poverty as an essential factor in political, social and economic progress.

Many of us also attended last month's women's conference in Beijing, where it was again made clear that democracy and prosperity cannot be attained or sustained in countries that do not value women as full and equal partners in society.

The conferences in Miami, Copenhagen and Beijing showed the world that issues involving children and women are not secondary issues. They are keys to building democratic institutions, strengthening market economies, and achieving social justice.

They are also among the hardest issues we face.

That is why the agreement reached in Miami last year was an historic first for countries of this hemisphere. For the first time, there was universal recognition that no nation can compete in the global economy if half its population cannot read or write, cannot find a job, or cannot rise out of poverty.

And that is why it is also heartening that, despite assurances from skeptics that nothing would be accomplished in Beijing, more than 180 nations endorsed a platform for action that lays out specific ways to expand the rights and opportunities of women around the world.

This is particularly critical today, given the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the skilled and the unskilled.

Those among us who enjoy the opportunities of education, health care, jobs, credit, legal and political rights are flourishing in the new global economy. Those without such opportunities are lagging farther and farther behind. And more often than not, those lagging behind are women and poor children.

This trend, if it continues, threatens to undermine the very institutions we are seeking to uphold: strong families, strong economies, and strong democracies. All will be in jeopardy if women

continue to be denied the opportunities they need to thrive and compete in the new century.

So, what must change?

First, values and attitudes.

In our everyday lives, we must begin to respect the dignity of each person, no matter where that person lives or what he or she looks like. To do that, we must be willing to overcome many assumptions, presumptions, prejudices and prejudgments.

Because, to truly respect a child means to respect every child in every family, boy or girl. To respect a child means to give that child the love, attention, and discipline he or she needs to grow up with confidence and competence. To respect a child means to nurture that child with the health care and schooling that he or she needs to get the right start in life.

Every time we dismiss the potential of a child because of skin color, parental income, or family background, we betray our own futures.

We must also appreciate the contributions of every woman, instead of pigeon-holing and categorizing women in ways that limit their potential. To truly respect a woman means to respect and protect her human rights; it means to respect the choices she makes for herself and her family; and it means to value the experience she brings to all facets of life.

Second, institutions must change, and so must the ways we go about our everyday business.

If programs and policies have outlived their usefulness, we should admit that they no longer solve the problems they were meant to solve. We must fix programs that don't work with reforms that are efficient and inexpensive. And we must insist that institutions -- whether government, schools, or health care systems -- overcome bureaucratic intransigence and put people first.

We must also take advantage of the many innovative programs that do exist throughout our hemisphere. Prior to arriving in Paraguay today, I was in Brasilia, where President and Mrs. Cardoso told me about Brazil's efforts to improve the quality of primary education.

I then traveled on to Salvador da Bahia, where an extraordinary effort is underway to channel the potential and energy of thousands of street children. One program I saw was a circus in which the performers were children, some as young as eight, who had been recruited off the streets where they lived.

They were not being trained for circus jobs; their performances were merely a vehicle for learning the value of discipline, teamwork, and hard work. Along the way, these children develop confidence, self-esteem, and pride in their accomplishments. Part of a program called Project Axe, they also receive schooling and vocational training, as well as counseling to reunite them with their families.

I asked one 15-year-old boy, who had been with the project since it began five years ago, whether it had made a difference in his life. If not for the project, he said, "I would be dead or in prison now."

Programs like this one, which receive support from the public and private sectors and some international organizations, can be replicated widely. But that requires us to share information, exchange ideas, discuss honestly our successes and failures, and learn as much as we can from each other.

Government has a vital role in all of this. But government is only effective if it listens to the voices of the people it serves, instead of making decisions based on political convenience or whim. And government must be held accountable for meeting human needs.

At the same time, government cannot address every problem alone. We must not look on government as a panacea, but as an able partner of business, non-governmental organizations, and other private institutions committed to investing in the promise of every person, including those who are poor, disadvantaged, and politically powerless. And one of the best things government can do is to make it easier for outside groups, non-governmental groups, to do the work they are willing to do.

Finally, as societies, we must be willing to move beyond inertia to action. And all of us -- individuals and institutions -- must heed that call to action. We must start by taking responsibility within our own families and then spreading that responsibility to the communities in which we live.

Every segment of society has a stake in this issue. And every segment of society can affect positive change.

Schools, for example, can be more flexible in responding to the needs of their students, young and old.

A few days ago, in Santiago, Mrs. Frei took me to a school that embodies the Chilean commitment to building an educational system for the future. I saw boys and girls busy working on computers hooked up to the Internet.

I learned from the Minister of Education that schools may begin to keep their doors open on Saturdays and Sundays to

accommodate the children of working parents who have no alternatives for child care, and for children who wish to acquire new skills for themselves.

I saw that Chile has not been content to stick with old methods that do not work. The government and people of that country are devising new ways of training teachers, involving parents and communities. All of this is happening now in many countries throughout the Americas and more can happen if we are willing to learn from each other's experiences.

Heeding the call to action also means that financial institutions must serve all people, even if they are poor, live in remote areas, or are women. How much more evidence do we need that women are a good credit risk? I have seen the proof myself at the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, where the poorest of the poor in the world have transformed entire villages by taking out small loans for cows, rickshaws, and other items they use to earn an income.

I have even seen it in my own country, where poor women at a project called Mi Casa, in Denver, Colorado, have banded together to take out small loans to help themselves. And they told me very, very directly how difficult it is for women even in the United States to have access to credit. One woman said: "Too many great ideas die in the parking lots of banks."

But all over this hemisphere, women are overcoming these obstacles. In Nicaragua, which I visited at the beginning of my trip, I saw how hard President Chamorro has worked to strengthen democratic institutions and promote a market economy. And I met thirty women from a very poor barrio in Managua who run a bank in their neighborhood, borrowing small sums of money to start their own businesses, to start a bakery, to make mosquito netting, to be a seamstress.

Not only had these women organized themselves to improve their own circumstances, they were also improving the circumstances of their families and communities.

Furthermore, they have, like every bank I have ever visited, a high loan repayment rate. In that particular neighborhood bank, the repayment rate was 100 percent. And from what I know about banking, that would be the envy of many commercial lenders.

Individual men and women need to change attitudes and then act, just as every branch of society.

Businesses can initiate policies, such as flexible work schedules, child care, and the use of modern technology, that enable employees to perform well on the job and continue to fulfill their family obligations. Businesses also can value women by paying women equal salaries for

equal work with their men employees.

The media can assume greater responsibility for the values it transmits by avoiding negative advertising and television programming that sensationalizes violence and glorifies the exploitation and degradation of women and children.

At this conference, we will examine these issues, and we will focus specifically on what can be done to address the pressing health and education of women and children.

We will discuss initiatives to ensure the elimination of diseases that primarily affect women and children, reduce maternal mortality and provide comprehensive health care to women throughout their lifetimes, including family planning. We will talk about what every nation must do to ensure that girls are guaranteed the right to an education and that all citizens acquire the knowledge and skills they will all need in the new global economy.

And we will explore ways to end the problem of domestic violence, which has destroyed the lives of too many women and their families in every country represented here.

I would like to make one final point about our agenda. Because we are talking about the issues that matter most in the lives of women and children does not mean we are not talking about the lives of men and boys.

When I was in Nicaragua, I noticed billboards along the side of the road. They showed the face of a crying child with the caption: "My father has left the home." The problem of the absent father is as tragic as the problem of the undervalued mother and wife. It is a problem that, in the United States, we are urgently trying to address.

If, as a hemisphere, we truly care about strong families, strong communities, and strong societies, we have to recognize that men and women can and must complement each other inside and outside of the home. We should not be at opposite poles; we should be partners in a common enterprise for the good of all of us, and particularly our children.

Because of the roles that the women here and many of you in this hall have, we know we can help initiate the changes that must take place if we ever want to realize the great potential of this hemisphere.

Like the women I have met all over this hemisphere in Canada, in my country, in Mexico, in Nicaragua, in Chile, in Brazil and here in Paraguay, we come together to pool our experiences and

ideas to improve conditions for our individual families as well as our national family and the family of nations.

I was not present at the earlier conferences, but I want to thank and applaud all of the women who took part in those conferences and who have moved this agenda forward. I was privileged to host our meeting in Miami and I look forward to the work ahead of us. It is the most exciting and challenging work any of us can imagine or be engaged in. And it is work in which we can make a difference.

Thank you very much.

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