

**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

Transcript from audio

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS TO CENTRAL ASIAN CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN
POLITICS
ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN
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Thank you very much. Mrs. Nazarbayev, distinguished guests. I am delighted to be here at this important conference.

I would like to thank Liana for organizing this conference and bringing together women who are leading the way toward a free, prosperous, and democratic Central Asia. When I look at Liana's logo, I am reminded what happens when women cultivate the soil and nurture the roots of democracy. We find that our work yields fruit for all citizens: for women, for children, for men, for communities, for countries. For all citizens.

I have come to Kazakhstan and Central Asia to strengthen the bonds among our countries, to see firsthand the progress you are making, to talk about the role that women must play in building and sustaining democracy from the ground up. I also want to bring a message of hope and solidarity from the American people -- especially American women -- who are standing with you as you remake your world.

Though we practice different religions, come from different places, and have different histories, we speak that same mother tongue -- the language of hope. Women have always found common ground to stand on together.

It usually happens when we're sitting around a kitchen table, when we're at the market, when we're waiting for the bus or watching our kids play outside. In the formal and informal interactions that make up our daily lives, women are talking to each other about the challenges we all face. We want to know how to raise our children and make ends meet. We want to know how to make time to protect -- or even think about -- our own health. We want to know how to make our religious

and ethnic diversity a source of pride, not division. And we want to advance the cause of democracy, advance the cause of women and make it clear that we cannot have one without the other.

When we talk about democracy, we often talk about our highest ideals -- freedom of religion, freedom of speech and press, freedom to participate fully in the civic and political life of one's country. But democracy also depends in large measure on seeing to it that individuals have access to what I call the tools of opportunity: education, health care, jobs, and credit.

What we have learned over the years is that our most cherished beliefs can be made real only through the everyday efforts of ordinary citizens. Yes, our laws and institutions are absolutely critical, but democracy is nurtured and sustained by what we in American call 'the habits of the heart,' in the way people live their lives, in the lessons they teach their children as they tuck them into bed at night.

Because this conference is about women and politics, I want to speak with you about how politics can help us bring about this new world. But I want to discuss politics in a very specific way. When I say politics I don't just mean electing women to every level of government -- although that is vitally important. I'm talking about the most important role of politics in a democracy, that is, our role as citizens. The contributions we make to civil society. After all, politics at its most basic is what we do when we come together to accomplish common goals. Whether we gather in non-governmental organizations, voluntary organizations, or in each other's homes, we make it clear that the most important person in a democracy is the citizen.

Like many of you, I have spent much of my life, not running for or serving in elected office, but working in and with non-governmental organizations. Even starting as a young girl, I was in associations whether in my school or in Girl Scouts or in my church. And as I grew older and was in college and law school, I was in legal and business groups. And I recall very clearly that the person who taught me that I had a role to play and a responsibility to my community was my mother.

That is why I am so impressed by what you are doing here today. You are pioneers. You are building a civil society that values the contributions of women -- and you are doing so without the benefit of an older generation to guide you. You are launching a new tradition that can and must be passed down from mother to daughter, from father to son, and on down through the generations.

Since I arrived yesterday, I have already seen firsthand what women and young people are doing to transform this country. Last night, I talked with young people from the Kazakhstan Association of Young Leaders who are teaching each other about civic participation in a democracy.

I remember one young man in particular, who told me that a few years back he thought he could never make a difference. Now, after learning the skills of democracy and working with other young people, he says: "I can see how much I can do."

Earlier this morning, I participated in a ribbon-cutting at the new Almaty Women's Wellness Center. This is one of 13 centers in the Newly Independent States that the United States government is working with to offer a full spectrum of health care to women. This center will provide screening for cervical and breast cancer and prenatal care. It will help women to protect themselves from dangers like tobacco and alcohol. And it will include family planning services -- which are vital if we are going to decrease the number of abortions, as Kazakhstan has begun to do. The benefits of a center like this spread far beyond its doors. Because better health for women translates into better health for their children and their families, and then their communities, and country.

Later today, I will travel to Kyrgyzstan. And the first thing I will do when I get off the plane will be to pay tribute to the important role that non-governmental organizations are playing in that country by promoting health care and humanitarian assistance.

I will then go on to visit women who are getting access to credit to create businesses that foster economic security for their families and economic independence for themselves.

Clearly, the women of Central Asia are teaching each other lessons about democracy in action.

Women are teaching lessons about democracy in Uzbekistan, where parents have launched an initiative to fight for the rights of disabled children.

They are teaching lessons about democracy in Turkmenistan, where women are actively engaged in civic education through a non-governmental group called "Dialogue."

Women are teaching us lessons of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, where 70 new NGOs have registered with the government; where the Society of Women Builders is teaching women on pensions about their legal rights; and where several NGOs have started a newspaper that is teaching about democracy.

Women are also teaching lessons of democracy in Tajikistan, where women leaders agree that "any country that is not interested in its women has no future."

And, yes, here in this room and throughout Kazakhstan, women are teaching lessons of democracy, by bringing women together to protect the environment, to foster a free press, and to support conferences like this.

These efforts in Central Asia are part of groundswell of civic participation by women around the world. Earlier this month, women from all over Asia gathered in Mongolia to learn about their legal rights and responsibilities as citizens. Last summer, women from Eastern and Central Europe came together at a conference in Vienna to share ideas, to renew and strengthen their faith in democratic values and freedoms, and to address challenges as diverse as the trafficking of women and the need for better health care.

And we will all remember how women from all over the world came together two years ago in Beijing, at the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women. Representatives from 189 different countries, including some of you in this room, articulated a vision that has been echoed at this conference: That a country's progress depends on the progress of women. That the strength of a political system depends on the inclusion of women. That the vibrancy of an economy depends on the full contributions of women. That the richness of civic life depends on the participation of women. That human rights, simply put, are women's rights. And that women's rights are human rights.

Despite the enormous progress you have made, we know that many challenges remain. The transition from communism to free markets and democracy has not been painless for women here or around the world. It would be unrealistic to pretend otherwise.

Right now, too many women are the first to lose their jobs and the last to get new ones. Too many women are barred by law, by tradition, or by ignorance from exercising their rights. Too many women are trapped in an endless cycle of poverty, unable to get access to education and credit. Too many women are

overwhelmed by the stresses they have in their lives, as they try to do more and more, with fewer and fewer hours. Too many women live in the fear of violence, including violence at the hands of family members. For them, home offers no refuge, the law no protection, and public opinion no sympathy. And, through all of this, not enough women are sitting at the table when political and economic decisions are made about their lives and their families.

This must change. Yet, while the oppressive structures of communism have been torn down, the political, judicial and economic organizations that protect women's rights in a democracy are just now being constructed.

That is why this conference comes at such an important time. It is enabling us to share practical ideas to advance the role of women in the political, economic, and social lives of our countries. It is showing us that when we embrace our rights and live up to our responsibilities, when we confront problems head on, we can find solutions.

The United States is proud to be your partner as you face these challenges. My husband, the President, has made it clear that our efforts to protect and advance women's rights belong in the mainstream of American foreign policy. And as Madeleine Albright, our country's first female Secretary of State, put it: "Advancing the status of women...is the right thing to do, and, frankly, it is the smart thing to do."

Our government, largely through the United States Agency for International Development and the United States Information Service, is supporting a broad range of programs that provide grants, training, and technical assistance to citizens working to strengthen democracy at the grassroots. They show families how they can guard against new threats like crime and drugs. They help empower women to succeed economically by giving them loans to start and maintain their own small businesses.

And today, I'm pleased to be able to tell you that the United States will be increasing our support for women NGOs working to build democracy in this region. Let me be as clear about this as possible: Governments that are serious about democracy must be willing to recognize and work with non-governmental organizations.

Now, of course, we women cannot create the kind of society we all want alone. We must reach out to the men in our lives. Husbands and fathers -- indeed all men -- must also meet their responsibilities: To respect women. Never to raise a hand in anger. To teach boys to respect and value girls. And to teach girls to respect and value themselves.

And we need to start with our girls today -- tomorrow's generation, tomorrow's leaders. We know that girls cannot lead tomorrow if they are taught that they aren't smart enough, if they are taught that their human value lies only in how they look or if they are taught that the violence and disrespect they suffer is just "the way things are." And certainly, girls cannot lead tomorrow if they are denied adequate education today. It is through education that the minds and aspirations of girls can either be snuffed out or ignited.

I know that you, and these countries represented here at this conference, are rightfully proud of your literacy rates, and your history of providing quality education for boys and girls. And I applaud you for that. In many of the countries where I travel and speak, that is not the case. Literacy for both young men and women is far too low, but for young women it is often even not a goal. But that is not true here in Central Asia. If there is one message that I hope you will send your fellow citizens and your government, it is that education, and the goals you have reached in the past, must be a priority today and tomorrow. In the new independent countries that are struggling to build free market economies and democracy, education for all must continue to be valued above all.

As I think about all you have accomplished in just six years, I am in awe. I know many of you have struggled very hard against obstacles and odds I cannot even imagine. And as I look at the progress that your societies and countries have made, I am deeply impressed by the persistence and the goals you have set to achieve. I am reminded of something I was told about that a Kazakhstani poet, Abai, once said, "After a harsh winter, spring follows, with its flowers and splendor." When I look at the progress that has been made despite the obstacles you have addressed, I know that spring will follow in Central Asia.

Spring will follow the work you are doing now to build and nurture democracy and strong economies because you have taken the long view. You know that you are nurturing deep roots that will one day bear fruit. You know that democracy is a work in progress. My country is now the longest surviving

democracy in the history of the world. And we struggle every day to make our democracy work better. So we know that there is no easy answer; that all of us who value democracy must work every day year after year to make sure its whole fruit, not only flower and blossom, that are shared among all our people.

I want to commend and congratulate you who are working through your government and non-governmental organizations to bring about this spring of which we speak and which we seek here. And I want you to know that the American people are proud to stand with you every step of the way. And that the American government will continue to support non-governmental organizations and particularly the work of women to build strong democracies and strong societies in this region and around the world.

Thank you all very much.