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**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS TO THE INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK
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I would like to say a special word of thanks to the more than 20 million people who are joining us via radio around the world, and to the broadcasters and radio stations who are devoting valuable air time to carrying this conference. By shining a light on the problem of domestic violence, you are literally helping to save lives.

I would also like to say a very personal word of thanks to the people and governments of Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina, whose countries the President and I were privileged to visit in recent days, and whose generosity of spirit I will always remember.

When I travel overseas on behalf of the United States, I always learn in new ways how very much human experience we share across national boundaries. The ideals and achievements we have in common derive from our noblest selves; some of the shared problems we confront in our different countries stem from the ways we all can fall short of who we can be. Today, I want to talk about one of those shared problems -- a devastating one.

This problem is all-pervasive -- and yet very difficult to see. In the United States and around the world, I have looked out over busy downtown streets or pastoral rural villages and seen women going energetically and competently about their everyday business. There is nothing visibly wrong with the picture. But I know too well that every country I have visited -- every country on this Earth -- shares a hidden part of the scene: when some of those women go home at night, they live with fear. Not fear of an invading army or a natural disaster or even a stranger in an alley; they fear the very people -- family members -- whom they are supposed to depend upon for help and comfort. That is the trust-destroying fear that attends every step of a victim of domestic violence.

For these women, home provides inadequate refuge; the law, little protection; and public opinion, even less empathy. Domestic and sexual violence against women remains one of the most serious and under-reported human rights violations in our region. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has said, domestic violence can never again be dismissed, as it so often has, as part of a country's traditional norms, or as a private set of assumptions about family life. Let us say it so loudly that every abuser can hear us: we do not believe that violence against women is 'simply cultural'; we believe it is simply criminal. And that is why the issue of violence against women is now being addressed as part of American foreign policy.

In my own lifetime, we have come a long way toward recognizing domestic violence for what it is. When I was a girl, domestic violence was still joked about on TV. When I was a teenager, it was no longer a joke, but neither was it taken seriously. Police were rarely willing to make an arrest. Only as an adult have I seen citizens -- many of them former victims of violence in the home -- rise up and say: we need to change our laws so that it is understood that it is just as much of a crime to assault a spouse as it is to assault a stranger.

A case in point is the United Nations Conference on Women. At the Nairobi conference in 1985, the issue of domestic violence was a barely acknowledged undercurrent.

Ten years later, in Beijing, it was front and center. It had made its way from the grassroots to the halls of power.

With this conference, our understanding has evolved one step further. Now we are acknowledging that domestic violence is not just an assault against a citizen -- it undermines democracy itself. For so long as women are held back from full participation in the lives of their countries by any means -- including by the kind of violence women disproportionately suffer -- democracy will remain incomplete.

So I come here with a simple proposition: no woman, no girl, should have to live helplessly any longer under the shadow of that fear.

This two-day conference -- which takes place during National Domestic Violence Awareness Month here in the United States -- gives us a remarkable opportunity to ease that distress among so many girls and women.

By sharing ideas, forging strategies, and learning from each other about what has worked in various communities to bring down the rate of domestic violence, we can help women throughout the hemisphere disperse the silence that has surrounded this issue. What many of you have done in your home towns and cities has saved lives. What we do here together can save many more -- and, of even more enduring importance, can change the climate of how societies see and hear domestic violence so that young women of our daughters' and granddaughters' generations need never know such feelings of isolation -- and so that young men need never believe that abuse is even remotely acceptable.

It's appropriate that we take on this conversation now. The challenge before us is daunting -- the movement against domestic violence dares to ask how to change behaviors and assumptions that are as old as recorded history. And yet, as a great American poet, Emily Dickinson, wrote, "I dwell in Possibility." Today, together, we dwell in possibility. For this is a moment that is infused with hope, in a time ripe for positive social change.

For the countries of the Americas are undergoing profound economic, democratic and social renewal. In the last two weeks, I witnessed this renewal firsthand in Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina.

Countries that were once paralyzed by debt or runaway inflation have embarked on tough reforms -- and now they are on the move. In fact, the economies of Latin America are expected to grow at more than twice the rate of the United States' economy in the next century.

Economic renewal has been accompanied by democratic transformation. Across the Americas, military dictatorships have given way to freely elected governments. For the first time in decades, millions of people enjoy the right to choose their own leaders, to engage actively in political life, to speak frankly, to meet in support or opposition to a cause, and to form opinions based on information gathered by a free and inquiring press.

But I think we all know that democracy, whether newly rooted or centuries old, is fragile. It depends upon the free expression of the voices of all of its people. And democracy thrives when neither law, nor tradition, nor intimidation, nor simple ignorance -- nor the fear of physical pain at home -- bars women from speaking their truth from their hearts in public or at home.

A battered woman often feels that she and only she is living out this particular nightmare. That loneliness is part of the shame that is part of the silence. But sadly, the numbers show how very common is that lonely woman's struggle. Violence at home cuts across lines of age, race, education and class.

My own country has reason to be humble and prepare for hard work when it comes to this: 20 percent of all hospital and emergency room visits by women in the United States result from domestic violence.

And we are not alone. Across the Americas, the statistics on domestic violence present an equally sad and solemn litany.

And yet. And yet there is cause for renewed energy rather than for despair, since we now know that solutions are emerging into our view. The same countries that bear the burden of such statistics are also devising cutting-edge strategies to combat domestic violence.

Indeed, something historic is happening here that the rest of the world can emulate. The entire region has taken the lead in fighting violence against women. Domestic violence and protecting and expanding the rights of women was at the top of the agenda at the First Ladies of the Americas Conference I attended in Panama City.

Today, there are new laws against domestic violence and rape in Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru. In these countries, loopholes have been closed. Enforcement stepped up. Prison sentences extended. Where there once were no laws against beating a spouse, now there are. Where there were laws, now those laws are tougher.

In Brazil, most major cities and towns have established special police offices to deal with violence against women. In Argentina, women have worked to incorporate domestic abuse issues in police training. Many countries now have human rights ombudsmen with special offices dedicated to protecting the rights of women.

I am proud that my husband has stood up as President to confront the violence and to protect American women. While grassroots organizing by women is vital to each country's tackling the crisis, it is only when men -- from the level of the men of the barrio to the level of the men of the Presidential palaces -- join hands with us to stand against violence against women that we will know our societies have truly been transformed.

In 1994, he fought for the Violence Against Women Act, which combined tough new penalties for offenders with funding for much-needed shelters, counseling services, public education, and research to help the victims of domestic violence.

The Federal penalties and prevention efforts included in this legislation have improved our ability to stop, prosecute and bring the full force of the law to bear on domestic violence. This landmark legislation established once and for all that domestic violence is not a matter of private differences, but rather an intolerable crime of one citizen against another.

The President also started the Office of Violence Against Women in the Department of Justice. And he appointed Bonnie Campbell, a distinguished former state Attorney General [Iowa] to head it.

Last year, the Department of Health and Human Services launched a 24-hour-a-day toll-free National Domestic Violence Hotline, so that those in trouble can find out how to get emergency help, find shelter, or report abuse. To date, the hotline has received more than 100,000 calls from all 50 states.

The President changed our immigration laws to protect legal immigrants suffering from domestic abuse. For too long, too many women stayed in abusive relationships because it was their only way to stay in this country.

They were forced to depend on an abusive spouse for citizenship. Under the new law, women may self-petition to become legal, permanent residents of the United States. No longer do they have to choose between abuse and deportation.

Finally, this administration has looked beyond our own borders. I am proud that the United States Information Agency and the United States Agency for International Development are working as partners with governments and independent organizations throughout the region to support initiatives to combat domestic violence.

It is important to point out the role non-governmental organizations are playing in this effort.

Let me give you just one example: The Inter-American Institute for Human Rights in San Jose, Costa Rica.

The Institute was founded to defend and foster respect for human rights at a time when repressive regimes controlled the lives of many of the peoples of the Americas. It offered crucial support to the brave individuals throughout the region who spoke out against torture and repression at a time when such acts often meant risking one's job, one's home -- even one's life.

In 1990, the Institute embarked on a new mission in human rights advocacy. It established a formal program on gender and human rights. When I visited the Institute with

Secretary of State Albright in May, I had the opportunity to speak with women who are in the forefront of women's rights issues throughout the Americas. As they said, there is little difference between violence in politics and violence at home. Both dishonor democracy.

The Institute and women throughout the Americas also have an important ally in the Inter-American Development Bank.

To many, the connection between a development bank and the issue of violence against women is a new one. But the connection is an example of the kind of real intellectual pioneering that can improve our societies from the ground up: the Inter-American Development bank has recognized the devastating effects of domestic violence on women, including not only physical injury, mental illness, loss of self-esteem. But it has also traced another level of damage -- a level that has an impact on development. The Bank recognizes that domestic violence has direct economic costs in terms of job loss, decreased productivity in the workplace and absenteeism.

Their conclusions? Women who are abused are unable to realize their full potential and contribute to their countries' development. What's more, violence against women drains scarce community and health resources and undermines productivity. A study by the World Bank concluded that domestic violence is as large a global health burden as cancer, heart disease and AIDS. Canada has gone so far as to estimate that its economy loses \$1.6 billion a year to domestic violence.

It is hard to express how important I think it is that the Inter-American Development bank is committed to working with governments to develop far-reaching programs to stop domestic abuse -- from training judges to creating networks to treat women who have suffered violence to putting on this important conference. And I would like to take a moment to thank Mayra Buvenick, the organizer of this event. She is a driving force behind the bank's efforts to see to it that a country's development is not measured solely in its balance sheets.

Investment in domestic violence will save individual lives. For that reason alone, it would be enough. But it has the potential to do more -- to teach a new generation of families that the rules have changed; that raising a hand in violence will not be tolerated.

We have made a tremendous amount of progress. But we have more to do. Let us remember that none of this progress would have happened if women themselves had not spoken out, demanded change, and forced their governments to respond to their needs.

We must encourage more women to make their voices heard, to join together in both community and national organizations, to press for change beneficial to all women.

The fundamental task of a democracy is to pass its essential beliefs on to the next generation. Central among these is the conviction that women's full humanity is an unshakable God-given truth -- and that democracy itself can never be fulfilled unless countries come to know and uphold that truth as intimately as they know their own histories.