

Spouses of Heads of States

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PRESERVATION

THE FOLLOWING IS THE UNOFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT OF THE REMARKS FOR THE SEVENTH CONFERENCE OF SPOUSES OF HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT OF THE AMERICAS AS DELIVERED BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON, PANAMA CITY, OCTOBER 9, 1997.

Good morning. Mrs. Perez Balladares, First Ladies, your Majesty, representatives of the nations of the Western Hemisphere, and Distinguished Guests: I am honored to be part of this Seventh Conference of the Wives of Heads of State and Governments of the Americas and to join you for a third year at this important meeting.

I would like first to thank the government and the people of Panama, especially our hostess for organizing this conference and for welcoming us with the hospitality we have come to associate with your country. My country, the United States, and Panama enjoy a rich and enduring friendship -- one that will grow only stronger in the new millennium. For even as our century-old partnership at the canal comes to a historic moment of transition, we will always be bound by mutual respect and a shared commitment to securing the blessings of democracy for all of our people.

I think it is fitting that we gather in Panama for our annual conference. Panama is truly the crossroads of the Americas -- a nation that literally brings our hemisphere together. The diversity of this country -- ecological, cultural and ethnic -- is a microcosm of all the Americas.

We have come together here from across our hemisphere in hopes of building a better world and better lives for all women, children and families. In many ways, our task is more difficult and more complex than that of the canal builders a century ago. Instead of mountains, we seek to move hearts, to change old attitudes, to banish hunger and disease and ignorance, to educate all our children -- and very importantly -- to empower the women of this hemisphere to participate fully in the life of our nations.

We are pursuing our goals at a moment in history that is full of hope, a time ripe for social change of the most positive kind. Across the Americas, military dictatorships have given way to freely-elected democracies. For the first time in decades, or perhaps the first time ever, we have millions of people enjoying the right to choose their own leaders, to form their own opinions based on information gathered by a free press, to speak frankly and to meet in support or opposition to a cause.

Yet, we all know that every democracy, whether newly formed or centuries old, is fragile. The process of building and tending a democracy is never-ending. Democracy can only take root when its principles are internalized in the hearts and minds of all people. And democracy can only thrive when no one fears the consequences of standing up or speaking out for justice. And democracy can only achieve its fullest potential when women are not barred by law, by ignorance, by tradition or custom, or by intimidation from making their voices heard at the ballot box, and from pursuing their most cherished dreams.

That is why I believe this portion of our conference, aptly called "rights and participation," is so important. Empowering more women to seek and claim their rights as citizens and as human beings is the only way we can ensure that our democracies -- old and new -- survive and thrive into the 21st century.

I am told that the word "empowerment" does not translate very well. But I am sure that every woman in this room knows its meaning well. "Empowerment" means the right to participate in the political and economic life of our countries. "Empowerment" means being able to lead lives free of sexual and domestic violence. Empowerment means access to justice under law, to education, to health care, to credit and property ownership.

In short, empowering women means making sure they are treated as full citizens in their countries. No nation can hope to succeed in our global economy if half of its people lack the opportunity and the right to make the most of their God-given potential. And as we can all attest, in too many countries, my own as well, too many rights are denied and too many doors of opportunity remain tightly closed.

Too many women live in fear of violence at the hands of family members. For them, their home provides no refuge, the law no protection, and public opinion no sympathy. Domestic and sexual violence against women remains one of the most serious and under-reported human rights violations in our region. We must all work to instill new attitudes and new protections against this human rights violation -- domestic violence. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright -- my country's first female foreign minister -- has said, domestic violence can never be excused as cultural. It is criminal.

Too many women, especially those who are poor and less educated, are unaware of their legal rights in the workplace, of their rights to own and inherit property, of their rights to vote and choose their leaders. While these laws may exist on the books, they have never come alive for too many women.

Too many women and children are trapped in an endless cycle of poverty -- a cycle perpetuated by inadequate health care, poor or no access to family planning and limited education.

But let us not forget that we already know many of the solutions to these problems. We already know what works to change and improve lives. Next week, I will be privileged to travel to Venezuela and Brazil and Argentina with my husband. There, I will be visiting microcredit programs, family planning and education programs -- ones that I, and many of you, have worked to support here in the hemisphere and all around the world. These efforts have long, successful records of empowering women to lift their children, their families, their communities, and themselves out of poverty.

There is also encouraging news to report on the three priorities that were established following our meeting at the Miami Summit of the Americas in 1994 -- the elimination of measles in the Americas by the year 2000, the reduction of maternal mortality, and education reform -- all of which we have heard about this morning. Last year, not a single case of measles was reported in 27 countries of the Americas. And while we may have experienced a setback with an outbreak of the disease in Brazil, as well as in my own country, we must stay on track to meet the goal by the end of the century. Every country in the hemisphere has joined with PAHO in efforts to improve prenatal and obstetrical care and reduce maternal mortality, and many of the women in this room have contributed greatly to that effort. We have brought institutions and individuals together through the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas to boost public primary education. In Honduras, El Salvador and many other countries, more children are staying in school longer and graduating from primary school. And we have helped to elevate education reform and revitalization to the top of our respective countries' national agendas, where it belongs.

But the topic we are focusing on now -- the promotion and expansion of women's legal and political rights is perhaps the most difficult challenge we face. Slowly, but surely, we are witnessing legal reforms to raise the status of women in the home and in society. In Costa Rica, women have pushed through a law against domestic violence and 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. In El Salvador, legislators have modernized rape laws, forcing perpetrators to face prosecution. They've also passed laws forcing politicians to prove that they have paid child support before running for office. A very good model. Here in Panama, legislators have reformed the Family Code to better regulate such matters as alimony, child support and child custody. Throughout Latin America, we see new laws encouraging more women to run for office. In my own country, we have introduced Comprehensive Violence Against Women plans that provide counseling for victims, training for police officers, and prosecution of offenders in all of our 50 states. These are some of the ideas we need to share with each other so that women throughout our hemisphere can experience the same improvements in their lives.

None of this progress would have happened if women themselves had not spoken out, demanded change and forced governments to respond to their needs. We must encourage more women to make their voices heard, to join together in both grassroots and national organizations to press political changes beneficial to all women, and to encourage women to take their

responsibility as citizens seriously to vote in local and national elections, and send more women into public office.

Only women ourselves can make democracy work for us and for our families. It is a message that is coming alive in countries all around the world. Last summer at a conference in Vienna, I was privileged to meet with a group of women from the newly-democratic countries of the former Soviet Union. They had just begun to recognize the power of independent citizen action to address challenges as diverse as the trafficking of women for prostitution and the improvement of health care. And they had gathered to share ideas, to renew and strengthen their faith in democratic values and freedoms. This kind of convening of many, many women might be beneficial for our hemisphere as well. To bring together women who are working on the front lines for the kinds of changes that will lead to the improvements we advocate. As our countries continue to expand our political, economic and strategic alliances, the women of this hemisphere can lead the way in building an alliance of democratic values that will strengthen our democracies into the next millennium.

In May, Secretary Albright and I visited the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights in Costa Rica. The organization 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. Over the last decade, it has helped guide those countries along the difficult path toward democracy by advising leaders, educating citizens, and monitoring critical transitional elections. Today, the Institute's new mission is to help the new constitutional governments, their police forces, their citizens and children to understand and live by the principles of democracy — to create a true human rights culture in the Americas. Secretary Albright and I met with women activists and officials who told us that even though the governments had changed, the task of safeguarding and deepening respect for human rights remained as challenging as ever. A few years ago, the Institute began a Gender and Human Rights Program designed to educate women about their rights and promote the principle that women's rights are indeed human rights. Later this morning, there will be a ceremony announcing a \$4.8 million USAID grant to help the Institute continue with this important work, focused on women's rights.

Like the Institute, our work as individuals and as First Ladies of the Americas is far from done. We must continue struggling to make democracy mean justice for everyone, to encourage and empower all women to take their rightful place at the table and the government, in the corporation, and in every institution of society to use their talents to start businesses and pay back loans, to use their voices and votes to elect presidents and build peace. And we should not rest until we have repealed the laws, swept away the webs of tradition, stared down the forces of intimidation that stifle the potential of women and children and that keep nations from being truly democratic and free.

Last year, I participated in a call-in radio show for the Voice-Of-America. One male caller, who called not from our hemisphere, but from across the ocean, asked me very earnestly what I had meant when I said at the Beijing Conference on Women that, "Women's rights are

human rights and human rights are women's rights." I asked the caller to close his eyes and think of all the rights and privileges he enjoyed as a man. Then I asked him to imagine a world where every woman enjoyed those very same rights and privileges.

I know that if we continue the work that has been started by all of you and that we have done together, we can move our hemisphere closer to making that world a reality so that question in the future cannot even be asked. Thank you very much.

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