

Women of Argentina, Buenos Aires

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PRESERVATION

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

REMARKS TO THE WOMEN OF ARGENTINA

COLON THEATER

BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

OCTOBER 16, 1997

Thank you, Mrs. Schiavoni.

To all of you -- Ambassadors, Ministers, Representatives, of the federal and local government, academicians, business women, homemakers, artists, teachers -- to all of you, I thank you for this opportunity to speak before you today. I would like to extend a special thanks to the staff of the United States Embassy, but particularly to the National Council of Women and their staff for the outstanding work that was done to make this gathering possible; and I believe we should show appreciation to Mrs. Schiavoni and all associated with the National Council of Women by another round of applause. Thank you.

I also understand I should give a special greeting to all the mothers in the audience, on the eve of Mother's Day, and I do so.

I am, as you may know, an empty-nest mother now, and I called my daughter last night to tell her that I had seen just a small sample of tango, because she loves dance of all forms and wrote a paper in Latin American history on tango and its origins, so I was so pleased to be able to tell her what my husband and I had done on our first night together here in this beautiful city.

I must confess that it is somewhat awe-inspiring to be in this magnificent theater on a stage that has been graced by Domingo and Caruso and Callas. I am almost tempted to sing, but in the interest of preserving warm ties between our countries, I will refrain.

But I would like to talk about voices, powerful voices, the voices of women in this country and my country, throughout our hemisphere and our world, and what we can do to make all of our voices heard. To have our voices heard about our shared commitment to advancing the cause of women's rights, advancing the cause of democracy, and making clear that the two are inseparable.

I can think of no better place to do that than in Argentina. The women of Argentina have long been pioneers on the frontiers of human rights and equality.

From the Argentine Beneficent Society to the National Women's Council to the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo -- with whom I will meet shortly, you and your foremothers have forged a remarkable record of speaking up in your communities, caring for those who cannot help themselves, opening the doors of education to boys and girls, lifting up lives and voices for democracy and human rights.

We are pursuing our goals of equality at a moment in history that is full of hope, a time ripe for positive social change. Countries that were once paralyzed by debt or runaway inflation have embarked on tough reforms and are now on the move.

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.

Yet we know that democracy, whether newly rooted or centuries old, is fragile. The process of building and tending democracy is ongoing. Democracy flourishes when its principles are internalized in the hearts and minds of all people, when no one fears the consequences of standing up or speaking out for justice. And democracy thrives when women are not barred by law, by ignorance, by tradition or by intimidation from making their voices heard at the ballot box, and from pursuing their most cherished dreams.

In short, empowering ever-more women to seek and claim their rights as citizens and as human beings will ensure that democracies -- yours and mine, old and new -- survive and thrive in the twenty-first century.

The word "empowerment," I am told, does not translate well. But I am sure that every woman gathered here knows its meaning. 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. It means access to justice under law, to education, to health care, to credit and property ownership.

Empowering women makes sure our voices are heard and we are treated as full citizens in our 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 promise. And, as we can all attest, in too many countries, my own as well, too many rights are still denied and too many doors of opportunity still remain tightly closed.

Too many women and children are trapped either in an endless cycle of poverty -- a cycle perpetuated by inadequate health care, poor access to family planning, and limited education -- or they are trapped inside social constructs that impoverish their spirits and limit their dreams.

Too many women are unable to participate in the economic lives of their countries because they cannot get credit on their own to start small businesses.

Too many women live in fear of violence at the hands of family members. For them, home provides no refuge, the law no protection, and public opinion no sympathy.

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, too many governments have not enforced them and too few women have been made aware of them.

Such problems as these may be daunting, but their solutions are in full view. Across the Americas, from Boston to Buenos Aires, there are cutting-edge, common-sense initiatives to give girls and women access to what I call the tools of opportunity: education, decent health care, legal protections, and credit. These efforts prove that women can be empowered to lift themselves, their children, families, and communities out of poverty.

Let me begin with **education**, for nothing outside the family is more central to advancing the cause of girls and women. And Argentina has long recognized that fact.

Our two nations have a history of warm ties. One of the most notable was the friendship between Horace Mann, the father of public education in the United States, and President Domingo Sarmiento, the father of education in Argentina, who was ahead of his time with his deeply held belief that girls should attend school.

The fruits of his conviction are there for the world to see today: In Argentina's strong and established system of education. In a literacy rate of 96 percent. And in a primary school completion rate of 90 percent.

Other countries in the Americas are rededicating themselves to improving access to and the quality of education for all their citizens as you have long done. Education will be the centerpiece of the Second Summit of the Americas in Santiago next April, and it will highlight models that are working.

Yesterday in Sao Paulo, for example, I saw an elementary school in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. For years, the school struggled. Many students were not learning and most did not stay in school. Fortunately, the business community, recognizing the importance of education, got involved, and created the Institute for Quality Education. Working with the local government, parents, and teachers, they have transformed the school. Teachers who themselves may not have finished high school have now received additional training. Students were tested. Parents were encouraged to get involved. In less than a year, test scores in mathematics and language went up more than 200 percent. Even in countries like ours, Argentina and the United States where we don't face such daunting challenges as Brazil does, we have to do more to improve the quality of education in both urban and rural areas and to ensure that all students have access to information technology. Concentrating on education and insuring that all the children of the hemisphere have a chance to learn will be the most important way that we can enable all of our economies to grow and flourish.

And an economy that grows and flourishes in Argentina or in the United States is good for their citizens and for other neighboring countries' citizens. But if we can create the capital of education in all the other countries in the hemisphere, that too is good for Argentina and the United States.

Another tool of opportunity is **Microenterprise**. Microenterprise provides small loans to people, mostly women, who would not otherwise receive them. This concept started in Asia about 20 years ago when it was determined that a very small amount of money, given to a hard-working

woman -- who might be landless and totally ignorant, but she had skills that were marketable -- she knew how to sew, she knew how to plant crops, she could do things with a little bit of credit that could bring income into her family.

I have seen all over the world how access to such credit sparks a woman's entrepreneurial spirit. Just in the last week I have seen two more examples here in our own hemisphere. In Panama I visited a group of women who, with a small grant from the United States Agency for International Development, started a business in a small village growing plants and seedlings to sell in city markets and also to sell to the Panamanian government's reforestation programs.

Now here is something that women have known for the millennia -- how to tend and nurture plant life. Women have held the secrets of medicinal plants and herbs. There are so many women throughout this hemisphere with those kinds of skills. To create a market for their product gives them a chance to use their skills to earn income to improve the standard of living of their families, and that is what I saw. Within two years, these women had sold enough orchids, medicinal plants and seedlings to expand their business. They had also furnished enough seedlings to restore 48 acres in one of Panama's national parks; and I talked with women who were using their new income to improve their homes and send their children to school.

I met an equally impressive group of women in Caracas. I entered an ordinary-looking building in one of what I was told to be one of the worst neighborhoods in Caracas. And yet, in this very well-kept space, sitting on an open-air, rooftop terrace, talking with these women, I was very moved and impressed. The walls were adorned with weavings and art works that they had made. As a light breeze blew in, one woman told me how she had started a thriving taxi company. She knew how to drive, she was responsible and hard-working, there was no transportation adequate to the numbers of people in her community, so she had this idea but no one would give her the credit to purchase the van that she needed until she came to this Microenterprise Institute. She said that when she finally got her own business, it was as if "the sky had opened up."

Another woman used a small loan to expand her juice stand that she ran with her husband. Then a few years later she had a restaurant and a butcher shop employing ten people. She had even been able to send one of her children to university -- a woman who had never finished primary school. She said the loan had given her the opportunity "to spread her wings."

Now these are not unique stories. I have met similar women in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, in Bolivia and Chile and Mexico, and I know they are here in Argentina and in my country as well.

Because a real job is the best form of social welfare, microenterprise works for the individual, the family, and society. And the more we can expand credit, to both women and men who appear on the surface to have no collateral, to be poor, but who have skills that keep them going every day in the hard lives that they face, the more we will create free and broader markets that will enhance the economies of our countries.

Access to quality health care -- especially family planning and reproductive health services -- is also crucial to advancing the progress of women. I have seen first-hand, as I know many of you

have, what happens when women are given access to such health services.

Just two days ago in Brazil, I witnessed the signing of an agreement between my government and two Brazilian state governments to support a family planning initiative. This came about because two years ago I visited a maternity hospital in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, and I saw men and women getting the information they would need to enable them to make wise choices about planning their families. I saw mothers cradling their new-born babies in the hallways as they stood in line for their check-ups. I saw young women, very pregnant, waiting for their pre-natal check-up. I saw infants were getting immunization. I saw parents were being taught what to feed their young children and how to care for them. And I also saw wards of women who were there because they had not received good quality health care.

In short, family planning and reproductive health programs were integrated in that hospital into maternal and child health services. And I talked with a number of mothers, as well as with the Minister of Health, who told me that for the first time they felt they could adequately care for the children they had, that they could invest in those children not only their love but other resources as well.

The result of a program like that was that rates of maternal mortality and, importantly, rates of abortion decreased because women received the health care they needed in a timely manner and furthermore, as the Minister of Health, an esteemed medical doctor and university professor, told me, for the first time poor women received the same health services that rich women have always been able to receive for themselves.

This approach of integrating the services and reaching out to poor women and men has proven so successful that it has been adopted as a hemisphere-wide strategy to reduce maternal mortality, and was announced at the First Ladies of the Americas Conference in La Paz last year.

Now the promotion and expansion of women's legal and political rights may, perhaps, be the most difficult challenge we face. And yet slowly but surely we are witnessing the emergence of legal reforms that will raise the status of women in the home and in society.

Domestic and sexual violence against women remains one of the most serious and under-reported human rights violations in the Americas. In country after country, we are finally bringing out into the light of day what has been thought to be a private matter. In Argentina, women have worked to incorporate domestic abuse issues in police training, and I applaud you. Many countries now have human rights ombudsmen with special offices dedicated to protecting the rights of women. In Panama, legislators have reformed the Family Code to better regulate such matters as alimony, child support and child custody.

And in the United States, we have introduced comprehensive violence against women plans that provide counseling for victims, training for police officers, and prosecution of offenders in all 50 states.

Throughout Latin America, countries are finding ways to open up political participation for

women at all levels, from the grassroots to the voting booth, and I understand that there are record numbers of women running for political office here in Argentina, and I know what a difficult choice that is to put yourself into the electoral system, and I congratulate all the women who are standing for public office or who hold public office because of the courage it takes to do so.

As more women hold office, we have to show that we care about the issues that brought us into the political process. That is especially critical when it comes to human rights.

At the conference in Panama City, I witnessed the signing of another agreement -- this one between USAID and the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights in 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 people in the Americas. It offered crucial support to 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 Madeleine Albright in May, I had the opportunity to meet and speak with women who are in the forefront of women's rights issues throughout the Americas. As they said, there is little difference in a woman's life between violence in politics and violence at home. Both dishonor democracy and respect for the God-given individual dignity of each human being. As the Secretary of State said on that occasion, domestic violence can never be excused as cultural. It is criminal and should be treated as such.

There are many examples that I could give you, and you could give me so many more of what you have seen happening in your own lives, in families, in workplaces, in communities and countries. But I have seen, as you have, how efforts such as these in education and health care and credit and in human rights are transforming lives. None of this progress would have happened if women themselves had not spoken out, demanded change, and forced their governments to respond.

Now we must encourage more women to make their voices heard, to join together in both community and national organizations, to press for political change beneficial to all women, to encourage women to vote in local and national elections, to make politics relevant to the lives of women, to send more women into political office.

Only women can make democracy work for ourselves, our children and our families. It is a message that is coming alive throughout the world. Last summer, at a conference in Vienna, Austria, I met with a group of women from the newly democratic countries of Eastern and Central Europe. They had just begun to recognize the power of independent citizen action to address challenges, and they had gathered to share ideas, to renew and strengthen their faith in democratic values and freedoms.

This kind of convening might be beneficial for our hemisphere as well. As our countries

continue to expand our political, economic and strategic alliances, as my husband today is speaking with your President about, 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.

Now many of the issues that are faced throughout the hemisphere and the world may seem far away from the lives of women here and in the United States. Because in many ways, women of Argentina and the United States have a wider spectrum of opportunities than the women and girls who live in the countries that lie between our own. I was reading in President Sarmiento's book, Life of the Argentine Republic, and I saw this quote which described the lives not just of women in Argentina at the time it was written but of women generally throughout the world, and still describes the lives of most women living on earth today.

Here is what he said: "Women look after the house, get the meals ready, shear the sheep, milk the cows, make the cheese, and weave the coarse cloth used for garments... The boys exercise their strength and amuse themselves... With early manhood comes complete idleness and ease."

Now I am sure the men in the audience would object to that description, but it is not mine. It is President Sarmiento's. And I am sure that none of us would describe our early adulthood as ones of "idleness and ease" in today's fast paced world, but the point is still valid that there are too many women whose horizons are very limited, but there are many women like ourselves whose horizons seem to be limitless and yet we, too, face formidable challenges in our own lives and the life of our societies.

I believe we have a responsibility to work on behalf of women who still struggle for the rights we have won. But we also must confront the new question that has edged up to our own front doors.

While the superficial homogenization of the world means that people on every continent wear the same jeans, eat the same fast food, listen to the same music -- these surface similarities do not override a longing for a deeper identity and meaning in our lives. Despite improving material conditions around the world, many people are not satisfied and families are under new stresses. The gap between the rich and poor grows wider in many places. The social safety net of health care, education, pensions, decent wages, good jobs -- is in danger of fraying for those less able to navigate this new world. And even for those of us blessed with good health, education, and affluence, we also ask ourselves many questions about the meaning of our own lives.

Questions about how we strike the right balance among our personal roles as wife, mother, homemaker, employed worker, citizen; about how we claim a personal identity in an age of anonymous globalization and high technology; about how families will raise children in the face of pressures from the consumer culture and mass media that undermine parental authority and glorify instant gratification.

This last question is of particular importance to those of us who are mothers concerned about the future of our daughters.

For we have not won our places in society, we have not fought for women's rights to make the

choices that are best for them, to stand by while the consumer culture does its best -- in my country and yours -- to objectify women and make girls believe that only their appearances, not their hearts, their minds or their souls, are important.

All the material possessions in the world cannot substitute for a rich and deep spiritual life; all the affluence in my country or yours cannot answer the eternal questions that are posed by every generation. We cannot permit the pace of our life today, the use of automation and technology, to substitute for what is most important-- the human connections and relationships that are the stuff of what life is made and which are so essential to creating those habits of the heart that every child needs to believe in themselves, to have the confidence to be able to do what they know is right.

This is difficult against the backdrop of this fast paced world in which we live. And I know that life is changing sometimes faster before our eyes than we can even make sense of. But we cannot leave the raising of our children, the inculcating of values to the mass media and the consumer culture. We have to do a better job through our churches, our families, our civic associations; we have to build up civil society to reach out to all young people to help them understand why so many of you have fought so long and so hard for the values, the rights and the privileges that now in my country can be too easily taken for granted.

Democracy cannot survive unless those values are passed on to the next generation and one of the values has to be that a woman's full humanity is an unshakable, God-given truth, and that democracy itself cannot be fulfilled unless women are treated with dignity and respect.

Last year, I participated in a call-in show on the radio for the Voice of America which went all over the world. One male caller asked me very earnestly what I meant when I said, "Women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights" at the Beijing Conference on Women.

I told 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 same rights. The right to make the choices that fit with that woman's conception of her future. That means that a woman may choose to be a full-time wife and homemaker and it is a choice worthy of respect. That means that a woman may choose to give herself fully to a professional or business or artistic profession that means she does not have a place she believes in her life for marriage or children. That too, should be respected. And for the vast majority of us who attempt to balance our commitment to family with an interest in the outside world and a profession that we care about -- that too should be respected. There should no longer be "one size fits all" prescription for the way a woman's life should be lived. And because we are fortunate to be women at the end of this century with many more years than our grandmothers and great-grandmothers ever could have dreamed, we will have many opportunities in our lifetimes to fulfill our various dreams and aspirations.

The acoustics in this hall are famous throughout the world. So what is said here perhaps can carry throughout this hemisphere and beyond if we raise our voices on behalf of women to

proclaim that we will not rest until we have repealed discriminatory laws, expelled the mythology about a woman's proper and only role, stared down the forces of physical and psychological intimidation that stifle the potential of women and children, and gives full flower to the belief that a woman has the opportunity and the God-given right to chart her own destiny, and then to work together to provide the tools of opportunity so that every girl and boy in this hemisphere can look with confidence toward the future. That should be our promise to our children for the next century. They, in many ways face, a more difficult life than we did. It does not seem as clear and set as to what direction many of them should take. We have to stand with them and with each other as we create conditions that give each a chance to stand before anyone and say "I am a free person, I believe in democracy, and I believe in building a better world for those who come after."

Thank you all very much.