

First Ladies Conference
Santiago, Chile
September 30, 1998

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First Ladies' Conference
Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
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Good morning. Mrs. Frei, thank you, once again, for bringing us together and organizing this conference. I know from the reports that I have received that it has been a remarkable and very successful conference. I'm delighted to be here with all of you – First Ladies and special envoys of the hemisphere, distinguished guests, members of the U.S. delegation – including Aida Alvarez, the Director of the Small Business Administration and a member of my husband's Cabinet. It is also a special pleasure to be back in Chile – and to be part of the gracious hospitality that it has always extended to anyone fortunate enough to be able to come to Santiago. It is particularly fitting that we would meet here in Santiago – the site of the Second Summit of the Americas last spring. Many of you were there as well, and many of you helped, along with your husbands and other government officials, to be sure that the priorities included women and children. And this conference seeks to reinforce those priorities that were set at the Summit.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to say to our friends in the Caribbean how our thoughts and prayers have been with all of you as you deal with the terrible aftermath of Hurricane Georges. I was delayed in coming to the conference because I had to go to Puerto Rico on a relief mission. And I saw for myself the great damage that was done there. But I am well aware that the damage in other parts of the Caribbean was much more extensive. And we will all be working to help those countries and people rebuild their lives.

This is the fourth Conference of First Ladies of the Americas I've had the honor to attend. And I'm pleased to see both many familiar faces as well as many new ones. I'm always reminded at these conferences that no matter what country we're from, or what language we speak, we share many common concerns and common hopes for the future, particularly for improving the lives of women and children.

A belief in the power of women to make a difference in their own lives and in their societies was at the heart of the United Nations Fourth World conference on Women in Beijing, which a number of you attended. I know you'll remember that women from every corner of the globe came together to draw attention to the challenges facing women and children. What that conference made undeniable clear – and what we all know from experience and history – is that democracy and prosperity cannot be attained – or sustained – in countries that do not value women as full and equal partners in society.

The wave of energy and optimism released in Beijing in 1995 has begun to transform lives everywhere. Governments are being held to the commitments they made, and grassroots action is igniting reform in every corner of the globe. I have seen such changes and reforms myself, from Senegal to South Africa, from America to Australia, from Eastern Europe to China. And I

have been particularly pleased to see and learn about the progress being made here in our own hemisphere in the Americas.

This morning, for example, throughout the Americas, more girls are sitting at desks in classrooms; more mothers are visiting health care clinics and having their babies immunized, and seeking other health care which they need. More women are running their own businesses, and gaining greater economic independence. More children are growing up healthier and stronger. More women are now protected against violence in their own homes – than ever before in our history.

I along with all of you have also seen democracy taking hold throughout our hemisphere. And women have played significant roles in these hard-fought victories on behalf of empowerment and democracy. You've heard from many distinguished speakers over the past two days, and you understand the progress we have made, but also you realize that we still have great obstacles to overcome, in order to ensure that every citizen, especially women, are able to participate fully in the political lives of their nations. One of the greatest barriers in our path to equality is that women still do not hold enough positions of authority, and leadership, and power. Women's participation in decision making lags behind our gains in education, our contributions to the workforce, our participation in grassroots activities. Yet all around us we can see the positive impact that occurs when women leaders are given responsibility for helping to improve the lives of their fellow citizens.

There are so many examples throughout our hemisphere. A woman mayor in a small town in Peru, who has promoted projects to protect children's rights, and created occupational workshops to encourage women to increase their family incomes without having to leave their home. A woman senator in the Dominican Republic, whose courageous voice helped pass a strong law against domestic violence in 1997. A young woman from Colombia, who ran for mayor on a peace platform in one of the most violent areas of her country, and is now helping to heal the divisions that were caused by violence.

Those are just a few of the examples. Each of us could give many, many, more. And we all know about the extraordinary leadership that our two women presidents, Janet Jagan and Violeta Chamorro, have given to the hopes and aspirations to women in their countries.

And so we stand at a moment of great opportunity for women in leadership positions. And we are realizing across our globe that unless women's voices are heard, unless they are encouraged to be full participants and citizens, unless they are given the tools to take responsibility for their own lives; unless some are brave enough to run for political office and hold leadership positions, we will never see the fruits of democracy spread as widely and deeply as they should be.

Luckily, many leaders in countries throughout our hemisphere and throughout the globe are recognizing how the empowerment of women is critical to a vibrant democracy – as critical, I would argue, as many issues that are often in the headlines, such as trade and diplomacy and national security. Because it is what happens inside a country, where we inculcate the beliefs in

democracy and a commitment to equality, that will keep a country strong and stable, despite whatever the external crises might bring.

As a result, governments across our hemisphere have begun to unlock the doors that were once closed of decision making and leadership. Today a growing number of countries require a minimal level of women's participation in local and national elections. Others have created agencies to promote women and family public policies. Some programs are now looking for ways to increase the pool of qualified women to compete for leadership positions, and others are using all kinds of means of helping women be effective leaders once they are elected or appointed.

The impact of these new laws – combined with greater political will – is even now being felt at every level of government. And I must admit that many countries have gone much farther than my own to boost the percentage of women representatives and leaders.

By 1996, all but two countries in Latin America had at least one woman Cabinet member. In Colombia now, over a third of the Cabinet positions are held by women. And while women are still vastly under-represented in legislative assemblies, there are signs of progress. In the Bahamas women fill as many as 33 percent of the senate seats. And in Argentina, as a result of a new law, women's representation in the Lower House of congress is 28% -- the eighth highest in the entire world. The number of women mayors is also growing, and throughout the hemisphere more women are serving as judges, agency heads, and in other leadership positions.

Such progress represents not only new laws, but also important social changes and changes in attitudes. Since more women are getting an education, and joining the workforce, more women have the internal self-confidence to feel that they can fulfill roles in their governments. We also know the deeply held attitudes against women's participation in public life are changing, slowly but surely.

I am pleased that my country will be working with all of you to further this progress. After this session I'll be joining with Mrs. Frei in a signing ceremony of two programs – funded by USAID – that will support initiatives across the Americas to nurture strong local leadership – especially of women – and will help countries more effectively pursue the goals of the Summit of the Americas, through joint training programs here in Chile. These partnerships – as well as a major donation by Merck pharmaceutical company, which will donate 5,000 medical guides in Spanish and help educate rural women about their health, are proof that the commitments made at the Summit of the Americas and reiterated here at this conference are being taken seriously.

Even as we celebrate these steps forward – and the remarkable accomplishments of women who have gained these positions of power and influence such as yourselves – we know we have far to go. When women are elected they often still are on the outskirts of legislative or executive power. They are not adequately represented in party leadership positions. And while women make up one third of the formal labor force in this region – they make up, of course, a much larger percentage of the informal labor force in the region – they are not adequately represented in unions or in business.

We all know building a better future for men, women, and children is not just the responsibility of governments – it is the responsibility of all of us. I hope that the results of this conference will lead to more action in each of our countries to be sure that women are encouraged to make sure their voices are heard. I will travel to Montevideo today to participate in the “Vital Voices” conference that will bring women representatives of grass roots organizations from throughout the Americas together to build networks, learn lessons, and lift up their voices and power, to make sure that the priorities that are being set at this conference will actually become a reality.

Today our work is more urgent than ever before. We live in an increasingly interdependent world, where our economies and our security – our very futures – are tied with one another. It is a time of unparalleled opportunity – but also of great risk. Those among us in this room, in this beautiful place, in this beautiful city, enjoy the opportunities of education, health care, jobs, credit, and political rights. And we, therefore, are flourishing in this new global economy. Those without such opportunities – too often women and children – are lagging further and further behind.

It is up to all of us to eliminate those inequities – and bridge the gaps that will enable every woman to feel she has a stake in her future and a responsibility to help her society and nation flourish.

Thank you very much.