

Vital Voices Speech  
Montevideo, Uruguay  
October 2, 1998

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**Vital Voices**

Montevideo, Uruguay

Address by Hillary Rodham Clinton

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Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. I feel like I am sure many of you do, that we have had such a rich morning already hearing from our conference participants, and others who have inspired us, and motivated us, and educated us. It is a great honor and privilege for me to be here in Uruguay, and to join all of you – the vital voices of the Americas. The voices of the four conference participants that we have just heard represent the extraordinary intelligence, enthusiasm and diversity of the people who have come together for this third historic Vital Voices Conference.

I want to begin by thanking our hostess, Mrs. Sanguinetti – for your warm hospitality and for that fascinating archeological education. That I will immediately go and read about.

This is my first visit to your beautiful country, and both you and the President have made me feel so much at home even in these few short days that I cannot wait to return. And I look forward to a time when I can do that in the very near future.

I also want to express my great appreciation to the Conference's co-sponsor, the Inter-American Development Bank. Now we have heard from the President, who is our great friend. Who I believe said again today how committed the bank is to all these projects. I have had the great honor of working with the bank and I've seen how hard he has worked to promote micro-credit, working against domestic violence, doing everything that the bank could do to make clear to everyone who would listen that it is not just a bank, it is an instrument of social justice, social investment and transformation of the Americas and I thank you for that Enrique.

I too want to thank Mayra for her work. She has been a powerful and effective advocate at the Bank for women.

And I want to thank Theresa for your efforts leading our U.S. government team to make "Vital Voices" an effective instrument of American foreign policy.

This is the third Vital Voices Conference. The purpose of these conferences is to give women from various parts of the world the opportunity to come together as you all have to share experiences, to build stronger networks and partnerships, to look for ways that we can introduce new and effective strategy in our common search for ways that will enable women to take their rightful places in all of our societies.

At this particular conference we brought together women leaders from all the democracies of the Western Hemisphere. Leaders in business, non-governmental organizations, trade

unions, from small villages and from very large cities, mayors and cabinet officials. We have also brought together and we have heard eloquently expressed today from our panel many who suffered under brutal dictatorships, many who lost family members to terrorism, people who have been in the forefront of the struggles to end repression, protect human rights, and restore democracy. This is a critical moment in history because so many of you have struggled so long to bring us to it. I want to begin by thanking you. You have set an example, you have served as a model, and you have given heart to literally millions of peoples throughout the Americas because you have never given up on yourselves and your future. And yet I know that with the coming of democracy, with the spread of the global economy, we face new challenges. How do we ensure that democracy and free market economies produce better lives for all people, especially the poor and the marginalized? How do we create conditions in which women are equipped with the tools of opportunity to become full participants in their societies? How do we bolster civil society and its institutions?

The countries represented here may be at different stages of political and economic development, but we are all searching for answers to basic questions such as those. And we share a common belief: we believe that a nation's progress depends on the progress of women; that the strength of democracy depends on the inclusion of women; that the vibrancy of an economy depends on the hard work of women; that the richness of civil society depends on the full participation of women; and that human rights are women's rights; and women's rights are human rights from one end of this hemisphere to the other.

I've heard reports how at this conference – in workshops, over coffee, in hallways – you've been gathering and talking with one another about how to achieve progress. You've been learning from each other. And you have been focussing on three broad areas: First how do we expand political participation for women in public life? Second how do we strengthen the rule of law? And third, how do we promote women's access to economic opportunities?

If this were only a conference where we came together and we met one another, and we heard speeches and we shared ideas, that would be a good thing, but it would not be enough. It would disappoint all of us who are here because it would not fulfill the promise that such an extraordinary gathering holds for us. What we have to think through is how we will, from this point, create those strategies and support one another within our nations and across our hemisphere to see that they are fulfilled. How will we answer the questions we have been asking ourselves? How will we reach progress in the three areas you have been focussing on? Let me take them one by one.

We have seen the fruits of the efforts that have gone into creating political opportunities for women in public life. Throughout the Americas, because we have obtained peace and stability that so many of you have fought for so long, we now have democratic governments that are open to debate, and free speech and association that were not there

before. We hope we will never, ever see in our hemisphere again a young woman driven from her own country because she stood up for the human rights of her fellow citizens. We hope that we will never hear the heart-wrenching emotion that we heard in the voice from our mayor from Peru when she talked about terrorism. We must never, ever allow terrorism to have a grip in this hemisphere again.

So this hard-fought-for peace and stability, these democracies, these free-market economies, they're an enormous step forward. But they are also not enough if they do not give people the belief that they have a stake in the future and do not provide opportunities for participation.

But think about some of the women who are here amongst us. Women who have pushed open the doors of political leadership. Some of them are known, so many others are unknown, but they lifted their vital voices when others were silent. They organized their work places, often at great risk to themselves, and they have been willing to run for office and accept appointed office when still there are so many attitudes that argue against a woman doing that in public life. Their voices should inspire us. Think of just a few examples.

A senator from Brazil – the granddaughter of a slave – who worked within the Catholic church on behalf of workers – and who became her country's first black woman senator.

A mother from a small town in Peru who, when elected mayor, developed projects to protect women's rights and created training workshops for women so they could increase their family incomes without leaving their homes.

A grandmother in Argentina who refused to bend under the brutality of the generals and who kept her eyes on the plight of her nation's grandchildren.

There are thousands of examples like that. Each of us could stand and tell them. But they should serve the purpose of reminding and inspiring us, of the price that has been paid to open those doors to democracy, and how disappointed all those who sacrificed would be if now women did not assume their rightful position and walk through those doors to make contributions to their families, to their communities, and their nations.

Today, more than at any other time in history, women have the opportunity and the responsibility not only to raise our own voices but to empower others to raise theirs as well. The women gathered here, we are among the blessed. Even though many have suffered, the spirit was not broken. And you are here as testimony to resilience and determination.

But think of the thousands and thousands and thousands of women throughout the Americas for whom no one speaks. Who believe they are not worth anything. Who have

been denied education and even sometimes fundamental health care. What will we do to raise our vital voices for them? And among the many reasons why women must participate in the political process and must take the risks of putting themselves forward on behalf of issues of concern to us all, is because all of those women and their children need our voices.

There is a very important report that was completed recently by the Women's Leadership Conference of the Americas which details all of the progress and the obstacles that still face women in the Americas. This report confirms what we all know: that while many governments, organizations, and individual citizens acknowledge the importance of women's participation in both formal and informal ways, women are still blocked from realizing their own positions, from going as far as their talents would take them.

Yesterday I was privileged to meet with the Women's Political Network here in Montevideo. I want to thank all of the women who came together to educate me about what they are doing here. They were a remarkable group of women leaders. A cabinet minister, a city council member, others who hold elective office, others who were very prominent in their parties. One of them said: "We grew to realize that what unites us is far more important than what differentiates us." For the women from different parties who honestly hold different philosophical and ideological positions understand that they can cross party lines to work on behalf of issues in common. And I have heard that Paraguay is doing the same. This is one very important idea that can come out of this conference: that there must be ways for women in political life to support each other across party and ideological lines when it comes to fundamental women's rights and children's needs. And this political network can serve as an example for us all. And I would include my own country in that example.

If one reviews the progress that has been made, you can see that the once closed doors have been pried open. More and more countries require a minimum level of women's participation in local and national elections. Others have created agencies to promote women and family policies. Some programs are now seeking to increase the pool of qualified women to compete for leadership positions, and others help women exercise effective leadership once they are elected or promoted.

These changes are having an impact. By 1996 – all but two countries in Latin America had at least one woman cabinet member. In Colombia, over a third of the cabinet positions are now 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 their new law, women's representation in the lower house of congress is 28 percent, the eighth highest in the world.

If those nations can assure women that level of women's participation, then we all must do better to make sure that parties are fair to women and include them in electoral lists, that

governments seek out qualified women and give them opportunities to serve. Because we will all benefit if more women assume positions of political responsibility. And I hope that one result of this conference will be very specific ways we can all participate in bringing that about.

The second challenge you have been discussing is strengthening the rule of law. Now there is, of course, general agreement in polite company that women deserve equal rights under the law. But there are still laws in the Americas that do not give women equal rights. And our first order of business should be to change those laws.

There are countries in the Americas that prohibit women from doing certain work: from working at night; from lifting heavy objects. Now I have always believed that the job should be suited to the person. And many women could not lift heavy objects, but some women could. And if they could qualify, they should be permitted to compete for those jobs, and jobs like them so they can better support their families, and we should change laws that stop them from doing so.

The larger problem though is that on paper we have equal rights under the law, but they are not enforced. There is uneven or no enforcement. Or there is enforcement only for the rich and not for the poor. So we have to do a better job of making all of our laws fairly enforced and making access to our justice system one that is not in any way prohibited to people on the basis of their background or their income. We have to do much more to absolutely institutionalize the rule of law in the Americas. With independent judiciary, with due-process being respected so that impunity will no longer exist. That the rights of all citizens will be strengthened. We know we will have achieved that goal when a poor, indigenous woman somewhere in the Americas is able to walk into a court and demand that the police stop harassing her, that people in the street stop treating her poorly, and that she be given the same rights as every other person.

And I would hope that by opening up the legal system to more women judges and women prosecutors, women will make sure that women's rights are respected and the rule of law is enshrined in all of our countries.

That is beginning to happen. Again some examples from vital voices that inspire us.

The first woman to sit on Haiti's supreme court helped draft the decree abolishing gender inequality.

The female director of the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights launched a gender equity program when she was a leading Costa Rican jurist.

There are many more examples we can point to. But we need more women lawyers, more women judges, more women prosecutors. And as a lawyer, I hope that more women will

go into the law in the Americas and use the tools of the law to promote social justice throughout our hemisphere.

I also want to say a specific word about something we have seen terrific progress in but have a long way to go and that is in domestic violence. Many of you have been leaders, both inside and outside of governments to make it clear that violence between spouses, between parents and children, in families is not a custom, it is a crime and must be treated as a crime.

More and more governments throughout the Americas are reforming their penal codes and passing anti-discrimination legislation. And we see the results. Twelve Latin American countries have adopted new laws classifying domestic violence finally as a crime, and enforcement has been stepped up, prison sentences extended. There are now special police stations for women in many countries, shelters and counseling centers and training courses for law enforcement officials and judges.

Yesterday I was privileged to meet with professionals here in Montevideo who are working both with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. And this particular crime is so important for us to focus on because we know that if women have their spirits broken inside the family, by the violence that so many face day in and day out, how can they ever have the confidence to be citizens of a democracy, to participate fully in the life of their democracy?

The Summit of the Americas which met first in Miami and then in Santiago set a goal of full equality between men and women by the year 2002. Now I know that is an ambitious goal. But I like that goal. And I like to remind people that that goal was agreed upon by all the leaders of our hemisphere. And I believe we must accept nothing less than doing all that we can to try to reach that goal.

Our third priority, at this conference, is opening up economic opportunities for women. There are some fundamental issues that we have to address before we can even get to economic opportunities. One is education and one is health care.

Women cannot earn good income for themselves and their families, and advance to the fullest of their god-given potential if they are not educated, or if they are held back by poor, or substandard, or unavailable health care.

So we must continue to do everything we can to ensure access to education, for girls and women, and to make available quality health care throughout the hemisphere. Because talking about economic opportunities in the absence of emphasizing education and health care is an empty promise. Because we certainly know that the economy of the 21st century will be unforgiving for those who are not educated and not healthy and not able to make their own way.

Now we all know that women contribute enormously to the economic growth of their countries. Both inside and outside the home. But that work, both in the home and in the informal economy is not counted in a country's GDP. I believe it is time for economists and bankers to start figuring out ways to count women's economic contributions in their nations' GDP and overall world economies.

I remember talking to an economist during one of my visits to Africa. He said "well women have no real economic role to play in the African economies that are emerging". And I said, "well you know I have only spent a few days in Africa but every where I looked I saw women working: I saw women in the fields, I saw women carrying water; I saw women in the markets; I saw women building their own houses. Now tell me what exactly is it that they are doing if not contributing to the economic well-being of their country?"

We also have to face up to continuing wage discrimination against women. Women in Latin America receive salaries well below those of men. And women who work in the informal sector, as many do, have no benefits and no security. Working women have never held the rights and opportunities and benefits that men have traditionally held. So we have to attack those inequities as well.

We need to celebrate the contributions that women have made. And I especially appreciate the comments about how women have been the ones who have managed poverty and have day in and day out, and year after year kept families going with very little in the way of meager resources. So let us celebrate what is really very good budgeting and extremely good economic planning if we stop to think about it, and let's look for ways to bring more opportunities and greater income into the lives of these women who have already proven that they know how to stretch a peso as far as possible.

We also need to look at ways of getting more capital and credit into women's hands. And I want to thank everyone who has supported micro-credit because it is truly transforming lives and societies. Micro-enterprise loans are expanding the support from international and bilateral donors and non-governmental organizations. USAID and IDB programs are already reaching well over one million women in this hemisphere.

I would once again issue a plea to commercial banks, and other potential funders, to look at the success of micro-credit as a tool for creating market activity at the grassroots level, giving more people within a society a stake in the free market. And I would ask, as I did in Belfast, that commercial banks look for ways to partner with the IDB or non-governmental organizations to put some funds into micro-credit so that we could expand their reach. I'm always amazed when I read in the newspaper about some very bad loan that a commercial bank has made and they write it off when we know that loans to poor women are repaid at a rate of between 95 and 99 percent throughout the world.

I have talked with such women from one end of our hemisphere to another, including in

my own country where we are using micro-credit to try and help develop economic opportunity for women, particularly women who were formerly on welfare.

Think of these vital voices:

A rural woman in El Salvador who overcame low expectations – of herself and others – to turn her roadside tortilla stand into a profitable business with the help of a \$46 loan. And who, because of that increased economic activity that she was able to generate, all of a sudden had the respect of everyone in her village. And she and her small village group of people who were borrowing and supporting each other understood that they had a real stake in their future. She was selected president of her village bank group. And she said something that all of us would agree with, and that is “courage is half of life.” Well for her, having the courage to do what she did was half of life, but having the credit to put that courage into action was the other half. And that is the kind of partnership we need more of.

A woman organizer at a banana plantation who has stood up to death threats to lead and inspire her co-workers. They have been locked out of their jobs because their company won't recognize their union.

Workers' rights are an important part of the global economy.

We have such great opportunities ahead of us if we are able to take the extraordinary benefits of the global economy and ensure that they are spread fairly to everyone. We cannot permit greater inequity in income to be part of the new global economy. And workers' rights are part of that. Regular and equal pay, medical examinations, training programs, benefits, all of that should be on the front burner for women and men who understand how important it is that workers be given the opportunity to share in the fruits of their labor.

Now where does this leave us as we are looking at this conference and all that you have discussed and heard? Well I hope that we are building on the progress so many of you have begun. And I hope we are producing real partnerships that will strengthen democracies and improve lives of women throughout the Americas.

Today I am pleased to make several announcements. First, the United States Government through USAID will commit \$50 million to support the common goals of this conference and the Summit of the Americas, to strengthen human rights, justice, and democracy particularly on behalf of women.

USAID is also increasing its loans to micro-enterprises across the Americas to \$120 million over the next three years, over two-thirds of those loans committed to going to women.

The United States Small Business Administration, whose Director, Aida Alvarez is with us

today, and I am very pleased that Ms. Alvarez could be here for this announcement. It has done a great deal in our country to promote micro-enterprise and has created an "on-line women's business center" offering training and support and research for women to start and expand their businesses. Today the Small Business Administration is unveiling the Spanish version of this website so that millions of women, throughout the hemisphere and literally around the world, can also access this information.

After this meeting you can go into the conference room, right outside here and into one of the hallways, and you can log right on to this new SBA service. And be sure and tell us how well it works, because it is our very first time to try it out.

Because of this conference the Discovery Channel, the Foreign Ministry of Argentina and the Global Foundation in Buenos Aires have come together to make sure that these voices are heard well beyond this conference. They will do this through a series of Vital Voices Public Service Announcements on issues raised here at the conference. Tomorrow each of you will have the chance to help shape those messages that will be broadcast throughout the hemisphere. So think please about the most effective way to reach women and men with the messages of the Vital Voices Conference.

Another important partnership that is taking place is that IBM Uruguay will produce computer and Internet training sessions for women in media and a political training workshop experience sponsored by USAID, the Partners of the Americas, the League of Women Voters, and USIA Women's Campaign International. This is one way that you can really test and improve your own skills and learn from one each other about how you can take messages from this conference back home.

The United States Government stands ready to continue to work with all of you. To make sure that this critical effort started here at this conference, and building on so much work that has gone before, will continue well into the future and will have the results that we all hope for.

As I travel around the world, I am very grateful for the opportunity that I have to meet with women and to listen to them. Their dreams, their aspirations, their hopes, their concerns. And I am always amazed, impressed and humbled by the extraordinary human spirit and hopefulness that I find whether I am in a very poor village in Bangladesh or Uganda, or in a very small business in Nicaragua, or Santiago, I'm always with women who inspire me. And these are the women from throughout this hemisphere who we must do all that we can to ensure that their voices are heard, heard in city halls and board rooms, and trade union offices, and political parties, in academia, in families.

If we carry forth from this conference the extraordinary example and words that we heard from our four panelists, and we take our energy and work together to make sure that these voices are heard, I think we have a great opportunity ahead of us.

I ran across a quote from an early Uruguayan woman leader, Dr. Paulina Luisi who said "We shall not reach the radiant mount toward which our eyes are fixed today. But on the ground we are breaking, our daughters will march to victory."

As the mother of a daughter, I hope with all my heart, that we will break that ground, and the youngest among us will see results, that we will make it possible in the next century for women and men to feel as they should. fully empowered, full of hope and confident, because there are no longer any of those divisions that separate us from one another, but instead a commitment creating a future that brings out the best in all of us.

Thank you very much.