

NGO Address at UN Population Conf.
The Hague, Netherlands
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PRESERVATION

**Remarks made by the First Lady
Hillary Rodham Clinton
at the ICPD+5 NGO and Youth Forum
February 7, 1999
at the Netherlands Congress Center
The Hague, The Netherlands**

Thank you so much Florence for that kind introduction. I am intending to obtain a copy of it for my mother. I am delighted to be here. I apologize for being somewhat delayed both by some airplane trouble at the beginning of my efforts to leave Washington and then by some weather which delayed my landing. But I am so pleased by the reports I have received about this conference and particularly what you have done together, bringing generations and people from across the world to a common purpose here today. I want to thank Mr. Meijer for his commitment in organizing this forum. We would not be here were it not for your efforts, Mr. Meijer, thank you very much. And to Ambassador Biegan. And to Dr. Sadik. We all, all of us in this hall, and countless others who may never know either of your names, owe you a great debt of gratitude for your leadership in the process leading up to Cairo and at the conference itself and for your continued efforts on behalf of the implementation of the Program for Action. I am deeply grateful, as I know all of us are, for your particular efforts. I also want to thank all of the distinguished ministers, NGO leaders, youth leaders, and representatives especially from the Dutch government and all of you who are gathered at this forum.

I am honored to have been asked to be here because I think it is essential that we have this opportunity to talk about the progress that has been made since Cairo and the challenges that still lie ahead. Every one of you here has in some way contributed to the progress that has been made and I hope every one of you here will contribute to the ongoing efforts to meet the challenges that stand before us. Every one of us has a role to play in bringing about the promise of the Cairo Conference. I was particularly moved by what I heard from the young people, the descriptions of what you all had to say, your concerns, were ones that I hope we keep at the forefront of our deliberations.

Now I know that there still may be some who are disappointed that Ginger, of the Spice Girls, was not able to be here. And I confess I am no substitute, singing is by no means a strong point. But I have thought a lot about women's voices, whether they are raised in song, whether they are whisper, whether they are a cry of anguish, or a laugh. I've heard women's voices all over our globe. And I recently ran across a poem by a woman poet from Suriname, Johanna Schouten Elsenhout. I think her words remind us of why we are here today.

Nothing rises so high as a voice that calls out in the middle of the day.
A voice so fine, a voice so strong. It's never false.
Even when the wind blows hard.
Woman, you rise so high you inspire,
You abide in the midst of the battle of everyday.

Think for a moment of the countless women all over the world in every country represented here, who are locked in the battle of the everyday. Those words represent all women: women who are struggling to care for and educate their children; women who are seeking more control and authority over their own lives; women who want to contribute to the progress that's being made in their communities and their countries. As I look at this great crowd I can see the diversity, men and women from around the world, and I am struck as I was struck in Beijing, by the passion, the commitment, and the energy that you possess that brings you here.

You are the vanguard of Cairo. The ones who are making the ICPD Programme of Action come alive for people. And your presence here at The Hague is truly a reflection of the new reality we are creating. No longer are the discussions about global challenges or their solutions decided upon solely by government officials and policy-makers -- often behind closed doors. In a movement that was truly born at Cairo and caught fire in Beijing, non-governmental organizations have finally taken their rightful place at the table, in their own countries and international forums like this.

Finally, the voices of ordinary citizens are being heard on the critical issues that affect their lives. Grass-root organizations and people working on the frontlines of their communities are becoming part of decision-making processes. The role that NGOs play in planning, developing and monitoring programs and services that advance women and families is being recognized for the value that it brings.

Almost five years ago now, NGOs and governments together helped forge a historic consensus around the challenges of global population growth and development. They understood that we had to take a different approach. Many of you said, let us stop focusing on lowering numbers and work instead on lifting up lives. Let's make sure that women, children and families are at the heart of economic and social development efforts. Let's create a far more comprehensive approach, that's based on choice and opportunity, not government control or coercion.

Now I know how difficult it was to bring so many views together and to reach a consensus, not only on the language of the final Programme of Action but on its goals itself. There were many times when talks were at a stand still. When NGO leaders would come down from the balconies and out from the side rooms to help people find common ground and craft common language. The level of NGO participation in Cairo on official delegations, in U.N. meetings, at the U.N. forum was certainly unprecedented, but it did set a standard that we have to continue not only to meet but to exceed. I wanted to come here first to salute all of you. Not just for the invaluable work many of you did in Cairo but for the progress that you are helping to make that transforms those goals on paper into realities in women's and men's lives.

Before coming here I invited NGO leaders in my own country to come to the White House to talk about the challenges that the United States faces in the area of family planning both in our own country and around the world. These are organizations as many

of yours are that have placed the concerns of women and children at the top of our nation's agenda. They have fought tirelessly in the halls of Congress and in their own communities to ensure that the legitimate needs of all people are recognized and met. They are the ones who have pushed successfully to increase our funding for family planning programs in the United States and to work to make abortions in America safe, legal, and rare.

And on my trips overseas I have been privileged to see first hand the extraordinary work that many of you are doing. I have seen young mothers cradling their newborns and learning how to care for them, at health centers run in small villages and in poor urban neighborhoods in some of our planets largest cities. I have visited family planning and reproductive health services that are literally saving lives. I have also seen first hand the programs that are leading the struggle against domestic violence and all violence against women. I've met young girls whose dreams have been ignited because now they have a chance to go to school. And I've sat and listened to women whose hopes for the future are being realized because they have received small loans that allow them to start their own micro-businesses.

Yet even as we celebrate the progress that is being made by NGOs throughout the world we recognize how far we still have to go. Many NGOs are struggling to grow, to be sustainable, be recognized. And there are, I know very well, governments that still stifle the valuable work of NGOs. We need to help equip NGOs with the skills, training, the advocacy they need to be effective change agents in their local areas. We need to continue to pressure governments to understand the invaluable role that NGOs play, and the kind of partnership that governments should seek to have with NGOs on behalf of the betterment of their people.

So today I challenge all of us to forge even stronger links with one another and with our government partners to ensure that the commitments made in Cairo are actually enacted. I also challenge us to keep sharing our own experiences. You know sometimes, when we listen to long statistical outlines of what is happening in various parts of the world, or when we hear the data come tumbling forth about maternal mortality, or infant mortality, or any of the other issues that concern us, they do not have the same impact as one or two stories from your own experience. Stories that you can tell to your neighbors, your friends, your colleagues, or the media in your country, to make it clear that what we are doing is not only saving lives, but transforming lives. And creating the groundwork for a more peaceful and prosperous world.

I also challenge us to continue to reach out to young people. This Youth Forum has attracted young people who are contributing greatly to the discussions here. In the newsletter that has been put out, I read that one person said that, "People have finally started talking with young people instead of merely about youth." And that is what we must do more and more of. By next year, nearly one billion adolescents, the largest generation ever in the history of humankind, will be entering their reproductive years. Whether they have reproductive information and services that they need, whether they

have the education and health care and economic opportunity to lead fulfilling lives, depends on the actions we take now.

I also urge all of us to continue to reach out to fathers and sons and husbands. If progress is to be made in promoting family planning and gender equity – or any of the challenges before us – then men must continue to be full and willing partners in this process. A few years ago, I was privileged to visit Senegal, and I visited some of the villages that were learning about democracy, and were using skits and role-playing to teach one another about what it meant to be a citizen in a democracy. And as they learned more and more about democracy and speaking up and voting, they began to look at issues that affected their lives. And in one village a conversation about Female Genital Mutilation began. And that conversation led to a vote, and by majority vote of both men and women, that village decided to forever eliminate FGM among their young girls. Two men in the village became so involved in this debate that they took it upon themselves to start traveling to other villages, walking long hours to get to the next village, to talk to villagers there about what their village had done. This grassroots effort, that involved both women and men, led eventually to the petitioning of the government to pass a law outlawing FGM. And finally this year that law was passed. So the kind of democratic cooperation; the commitment to goals by both men and women, will literally change and save girls lives in Senegal.

And that brings me to my final challenge. And it's a challenge that we need especially to harken to in these days when we feel sometimes that we take one step forward and then maybe a half a step back. But the challenge to all of us is to persevere. Don't ever think that the work you do day in and day out is not having an impact on people's lives. And don't ever think you are working alone. Look around you here. Feel the strength in numbers and common purpose that this great hall gives us all.

As the poem I started with says, you inspire, you abide, in the midst of the battle of every day. We have come a very long way in the last years. It may not seem fast enough to many of us who are impatient, and I'm sure it seems absolutely glacial to the young people. But it wasn't until Nairobi that domestic violence was recognized as a crime, and not a cultural activity, or a family matter. It was not until Cairo that we began to talk about lifting up women's lives and making development and population go hand in hand as our twin goals. And it wasn't until Beijing that we said once and for all that women's rights are human rights. There are no differences. So we have made progress together. And if we continue to make that progress, we will see Cairo's goals enacted. And countless men, women, and children, who may never come to The Hague, whom you may never touch directly, will be grateful for your work. God bless you for the work you do, every single day, in the midst of the battle. Thank you very much.