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PRESERVATION

## REMARKS AT UNIFEM LUNCHEON FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

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Thank you very much. I am deeply honored and delighted to receive this award and to have an opportunity to come here today to thank all of you for the work that UNIFEM and the United States Committee for UNIFEM has done and is doing. I kind of like the idea that you were reaching 250 million women, Hope, and I think that is a worthy goal that we ought to do everything we can to attain. And with the leadership represented here, I think that is absolutely possible. I was honored to be here earlier to be part of the celebration of International Women's Day, and I know that there are more of you than I can recognize in this room who have worked hard to do what you could do -- both individually and through your organizations, UNIFEM and others -- on behalf of women, not just one day a year but every day.

I know that Noeleen Heyzer, the executive director of UNIFEM, has been a leader that all of us are proud of, and I particularly want to commend the work that she has done.

Margaret Snyder, UNIFEM's founding director, got all of this started and off on the right track, which I am very grateful for. And I want to thank Hope Miller, who has given strong leadership to the U.S. Committee for UNIFEM. Her elegance and eloquence speaks volumes about her commitment and the commitment of UNIFEM, and I want to thank you indeed for your work. I also want to thank Ruth Zeller, the president of the Metropolitan New York chapter for hosting this event, and indeed to all of you who are part of the New York chapter and the other chapters that are now springing up around the country. There has been a dramatic expansion in just the past few years, and to all of you who come from those chapters, I want to thank you. I also want to recognize Norma Levitt, the former president of the New York chapter. I thank her for her leadership. And I was pleased to be with the Secretary General and Mrs. Kofi Annan earlier today, and I am glad that Nane is with us again. I want to thank her for her contributions in so many ways.

I know that this award has been given to some extraordinary people before me, and I am very grateful to join their numbers. Certainly, our remarkable Secretary of State and our former ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, has continued to demonstrate leadership on behalf of not only women, but on issues of importance to men and women around the globe. Civil rights pioneer Dorothy Height, a friend of mine, was also one of the recipients, and she has also, in an indefatigable way, continued to fight for civil rights and women's rights. And then the indomitable Bella Abzug, who was referred to earlier this morning in the International Women's Day celebration: she was not only a recipient of this award, but she has continued to, in her own way, urge us forward. I joked this morning that I often speak with Eleanor Roosevelt, and that was quickly followed -- I think Agnes is here, perhaps Agnes said that she

also has someone she speaks to, and it is Bella Abzug. (Laughter.) Now her conversations, I can guarantee you, are a lot more interesting and dynamic than mine.

I also understand that one of the former recipients is here with us today -- Mildred Robbins Leet, who was honored with her late husband in 1992 for their invaluable work in promoting small grants and loans to women in developing countries through one of the most innovative kinds of grassroots, trickle down, trickle up efforts that we are aware of. So I am delighted to join this distinguished company.

You also -- I'm sure if you were at the speech this morning -- know that I shamelessly stole the slogan of UNIFEM -- "Women Hold Up Half the Sky"-- as a way of really putting into words and a metaphor what it is we are attempting to do: to equip women to hold up half the sky and give them the rights and the opportunities that they need to do so. That was a phrase that I first heard when I was in China, and I used it in a speech that I gave in Shanghai to talk about what I had been hearing and talking with women in China about, what their needs are, and to make clear that we have to do everything we can to both become aware of and knock down the barriers that hold women back from being able to both reach towards the sky and do their part to hold it up. There are many, many barriers that you are well aware of because you have taken them on and you've worked to try to tear them down. Violence against women continues to be one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world. And as supporters of UNIFEM, you are helping to end that violence so that women and children can live without fear in their own homes and communities. Women also lack access to jobs and economic opportunities that would enable them to increase their income and better support themselves and their families. And as supporters of UNIFEM, you are helping to provide women with small loans to start their own businesses and fulfill their dreams.

I think microcredit and the spread of microcredit in the last several years is one of the great developments in the effort to alleviate and eliminate poverty and lift up women, and I commend you for playing such an important role in doing that. Women are also still poorly represented in the councils of government and in terms of the education which they receive, and once again UNIFEM is on the front lines tearing down those barriers by helping to and encouraging others to invest in girls' and women's education. And you are also making sure that women have their rightful opportunities with respect to political empowerment.

One of the great stories that I personally have learned about and been able to witness in the last several years that really demonstrates how women can organize on behalf of themselves comes out of Senegal, where two years ago I visited villages where people were learning about democracy for the very first time. You know, every time I am privileged to travel on behalf of the United States, either with my husband or alone, I always return wishing I could take every American with me, or at least every American teenager with me. That's a thought -- imagine that. But what I mean by that is that if I could expose more Americans to what is actually going on around the world so that they don't just form their opinions from the headlines, from the tragedies, from the catastrophes that have been a part of human history from the beginning. The

untold story is the story of progress, of movement, of people coming together, of living under democracies, of making decisions for themselves and their families that advance their own lives and that of their societies.

So in Senegal, when I visited in one particular village where the people in the village were acting out democracy, they were using skits to learn how one voted and how one spoke up in a meeting and the role that one could play in making decisions in their community. I was just entranced. I sat there, under a big tent, and watched them argue back and forth -- something they had never done before, and particularly women had never felt that they were capable of doing before. I learned that after one of those sessions, one of those democracy building sessions, the people in the village began to talk about how the traditional practice of FGM [female genital mutilation] was imposing a terrible cost on the lives and health of their young girls. It wasn't that they were concerned that it was something that someone from the outside had told them that they should try to end, but they came to it through their democratic expression of ideas, on their own, that this was a health problem, that this was hurting their daughters and their granddaughters, and they voted to end the practice. Following that vote, two men in the village, one quite elderly and one somewhat younger, decided that they would walk from village to village and tell other villages about the vote that had been taken and explain that they had studied the Quran and it was not in the Quran, and they had learned about health and they knew it was bad for their girls.

And so these two men, supported by the entire village, began this truly grassroots walking effort to try to persuade other villages to consider this issue and to act upon it in a democratic way. I met -- when I came back a year later -- last spring with the President, a group of women and men from that original village who had gone on this, what I think of as a democracy journey on behalf of this issue, and they had reached so many villages and convinced so many to take a vote to end the practice that they felt emboldened to go and approach the national government. And they came with a petition and a letter for the President asking that a law be passed to outlaw the practice in the entire country -- and indeed that is exactly what happened.

Now what I learned was that this original project, this democracy-building project, to educate these villages in Senegal about everything having to do with learning how to use their voice, but also in specific terms about the health hazards of FGM, was a joint project of UNIFEC, local NGOs, and UNIFEM. So in a very direct way, the work that you in this room support has led to very concrete results, and that's only one that I could mention. And last month the law was passed and the President signed it, and so there will, I'm sure, be more countries that follow suit. But that little beginning, that democracy-building exercise, has led to that national change.

I am pleased to note that there are now 12 chapters of the U.S. Committee for UNIFEM actively working around the country -- raising funds and public awareness about women's rights, lobbying Congress, and doing other work that is very significant. And I want to just mention

two that I hope you will pay particular attention to.

We must do more to persuade members of Congress of the importance of the United Nations and work that is done by the UN and UNIFEM. And if all of us would take some of these stories instead of talking in abstract, large, macro terms about what happens in the world and balance of power and all of the other issues that we read about in the newspaper, but instead talk about it in very human terms -- tell these stories, try to grab the attention of your member of Congress that the work that is done at the UN through UNIFEM is literally changing and bettering lives. The status of women has been improving, and some of that credit is due to the work of the UN, UNIFEM, UNICEF, and other multi-lateral organizations that are associated with the UN.

The second cause that I hope we can see some progress on is to persuade the Congress to ratify Cedaw, the women's human rights treaty that we are one of the few countries remaining who has not. The President sent the treaty to the Senate. It has sat in the committee since then and I think we need more grassroots citizen requests made to the Senate to consider this important treaty. The United States, when we sent it forward, put reservations on it. There were things that we wanted to be sure that were noted -- it can go forward now -- if the Senate would only act.

One of your great contributions is that you are beginning to reach out to young people, and particularly young women, about the work that is done here. I know that there has been a recently added and quite active chapter at my alma mater, Wellesley College, and that the head of that chapter is a young woman from Bosnia who is now a sophomore at Wellesley who is here with us today. And I want to ask Leila Toplic to please stand.

I'm very pleased that you're here, Leila, and I'm delighted you're at Wellesley, I must say, but especially because you are representing other young people -- not only here in the United States but in the world as well. Another one of my favorite Eleanor Roosevelt quotes is that, "The destiny of human rights is in the hands of all of our citizens, in all of our communities."

So for us to succeed, ordinary citizens must do our part to lift up the lives of other ordinary citizens around the world. And women here in the United States at this moment in our history, where we are blessed beyond believability with economic and social and political blessings, must do our part to help lift up the lives and voices of other women.

So thank you for this award, but much more than that, thank you for what you have done to move the cause of women's rights forward. And thank you for staying the course to ensuring that all women here at home and around the world have access to the opportunities they need to live up to their God-given potential.

Thank you all very much.