

UN International Women's Day
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**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

United Nations International Women's Day

Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
New York, NY
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Thank you so much, Agnes, and thank you all who are part of the Group on Equal Rights for Women in the UN for hosting this gathering. I was very pleased to be invited to participate today, and it is a great honor for me to return to the United Nations. I am especially pleased that I could be present to hear the Secretary General's speech this morning -- a combination of inspiration and education and down-to-earth practical advice. I think we would expect no less from this remarkable Secretary General. And I am very grateful for his leadership during these times.

Last year, we were honored to have the Secretary General join the President and me at the White House to mark International Women's Day, and at that time the Secretary General said the following: "Women's rights are not something to be given or taken away by government like a subsidy... the oppression of women, from discrimination to death, is the oppression of humanity." There could not be a more eloquent, brief, to-the-point statement about the issue that we are confronting today. And as we gather once again for this special international tribute to women's accomplishments around the world, we are, I am, and countless millions of men and women who never will perhaps even know his name, are grateful that the Secretary General stands with us -- as he stands every day -- as a true champion of women's rights and human rights.

As some of you may recall, and as I am delighted to remember, I had the privilege of addressing the United Nations a little over a year ago on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That was a special moment for me because I was able to quote Eleanor Roosevelt, one of my favorite predecessors, someone whom I have been accused of talking with from time to time. And I can only suggest that if more people talked with her from time to time, the world would be a better place, I believe. She devoted her life to human rights and, particularly in our country, to civil rights. And she understood very well how the declaration would create a new international standard against which we would all be measured. But I particularly appreciate her reminding us, as she did, that human rights began "in small places, close to home, so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world." It is in those small places -- homes, schools, health clinics, markets -- that women are lifting up their lives and the lives of their families.

And the Secretary General rightly reminded us that perhaps it all begins in the smallest of

all places -- in our hearts and our minds, who we are as women, as human beings, our relationships, our connections with one another. They may never appear on any globe or map of the world, but they truly do map the extent of our capacity to live with each other, and to lift up one another, and to make good on the promise of the United Nations.

We are pleased to celebrate today that more women and girls are learning to read and write and, often for the first time, nations and families are investing in girls' education. We're also pleased that women are living longer and healthier lives and that more of us are surviving childbirth as we gain greater access to health care and reproductive services. We also see throughout the world that women are discovering a new level of economic independence. They're contributing more to their families and communities. They're gaining access to credit and jobs that can give them a decent standing of living. And we know and we heard, as the names were recited by the Secretary General, that from the United Nations to the United States to places throughout the world, more women are holding positions of power and authority.

So it is remarkable what has been accomplished over the long span of the last century and even within the last year. I am pleased that the government of Yemen waived its tuition fees for elementary school girls in order to encourage families to send them to school. Turkey passed the Family Protection Law making spousal abuse a crime. The nations of Cote D'Ivoire and Togo passed statutes that banned the practice of female genital mutilation, and only a month ago, the government of Senegal banned the practice as well. Women of Nigeria -- who have struggled 39 years for this moment -- are celebrating the overturning of a traditional practice that denied widows inheritance rights. And for the first time, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia prosecuted the aiding and abetting of rape as a war crime.

Now much of that progress, and there could be many other examples, has been sparked by the United Nation's longstanding commitment to bringing women together in international forums to talk about common challenges, and to forge a common future. And I know that the delegations and the NGOs represented here are meeting now as participants in the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Just think that it wasn't until Nairobi, which was not very long ago, that domestic violence was finally recognized as a crime, and not a cultural tradition. It wasn't until the UN Conference in Cairo that the world agreed that population and economic development issues must go hand in hand, and that women must be at the heart of our efforts for development.

And it wasn't until women gathered together in Beijing that we said to the world -- once and for all -- that women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights.

These UN conferences have encouraged the flowering of ideas and all kinds of possibilities where none had been dreamed of before. Non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups have been encouraged to do the important work -- at the grassroots level -- of helping women change their lives. And governments have made new commitments thanks to the

United Nations' conferences. I'm especially pleased that UNIFEM has encouraged the investments in women's education and leadership training and microcredit loans that are beginning to transform lives everywhere. In looking at the work of UNIFEM, I can find so many examples from around the world. A woman in Somalia, where the war has displaced so many families and resulted in great human suffering, was trained by UNIFEM in conflict resolution and now encourages other women to help bring peace to that troubled land. A woman in India who was the only daughter in her family when her father died, lost everything. Her uncle took the house, her in-laws were evicted, and she lost her older son. But through UNIFEM she learned about her legal rights and now she has her house and her son back again, and most importantly, she has her dignity. And I'm told she is even running for elected office in her community.

Women have been on the front lines in the battle for human rights and individual dignity for a very long time. But we are finally hearing their voices. Through an effort called Vital Voices, a public/private partnership started by the American government to support women and democracy, I've had the privilege of hearing many of those voices around the world. Sometimes they are raised in song, as we heard earlier from our singers, sometimes they're barely a whisper; sometimes you hear them in a cry of anguish, or maybe a burst of laughter. But throughout the world, I've heard those vital voices.

In Romania and Russia, I've heard the voices of women struggling to recreate a civil society where they had only known authoritarian rule and there had been no tradition of democracy. They are attempting to be sure that their voices are heard and their contributions recognized. In Northern Ireland, I've heard the voices of Catholic and Protestant women who've never been in the same room together before, but who now sit down and talk about what they have in common and how they can work across sectarian lines. In Guatemala and El Salvador, I sat with women who'd been on opposite sides of the civil wars that have only recently ended there. I remember listening to one woman who had been a guerilla leader, sitting next to the sister of the president of the country, and they both talked about how they would have never known of one another if they had not been brought together to recognize that they did indeed share common goals -- not only a common humanity but as women -- a commitment to a better, more peaceful future.

Many women around the world are finding their voice in new ways. And as we stand here together we have to do all that we can to make sure that those voices are amplified, their stories are heard and told. I appreciated the Secretary General sharing some stories from his own experience. Because sometimes stories make the point much better, don't they, than all the statistics and all of the talking that we can engage in at great forums. One single story can pierce through and make it clear that we are all in the same story, we all face the same challenges: What lessons will we bring from this 20th century into the 21st? How will we honor the past? But look at it with very open eyes, recognizing the tragedy, the violence, the horror that has beset this century, but also appreciating the advances, the scientific discoveries, the new ways that women and men have been able to create new lives and opportunities.

One of the most powerful lessons we have learned from experience and history, and confirmed at Nairobi and Cairo and Beijing, is that a nation's progress depends not only on protecting women's fundamental human rights, but on ensuring that those women have access to what we call the tools of opportunity.

No nation, with all respect, can expect to succeed in the global economy of the 21st century if half of its people lack the opportunity and the right to make the most of their God-given potential. Now that does not mean that there is only one way that that potential can be realized. There are as many different life paths for women as there are for men. In fact, I would argue, perhaps even more because of our obligations and desires to have and raise children, our commitment to relationships both close at home and further outside our families. But what we must strive for is to create the conditions in which women have the right to make the choices in their lives for themselves. And some women may choose very traditional paths -- and we should respect that and support it -- but other women may wish to do something totally unprecedented in their family and their culture and we should be willing to support that as well. Responsible choices deserve the kind of responsible support that families and societies should be working to offer as we move into this new century. No nation can hope to move forward if its women and children are trapped in endless cycles of poverty; when they don't have the health care they need; when too many of them still die in childbirth; when they cannot read or take a job for which they will receive equal pay for equal work.

Without these basic rights and opportunities, women will continue to suffer. But that is only half the story because their suffering will also drag down their families and their societies as well.

We know that through the recent experience of the global financial crisis that many countries have faced some very difficult decisions. Many women have been the first to be fired, have lost their jobs, lost their middle-class standing, lost their opportunity to try to progress beyond their own parents. We know that in countries embroiled in armed conflicts, women and children make up the vast surge of humanity fleeing the violence as refugees. And often their suffering is compounded when they are used as weapons of war.

We can point to many problems around our world today where women -- for reasons of history, culture, discrimination, prejudice -- are used to lift up patriarchy, are used really as objects in order for others to exercise power. There probably is no more egregious and systematic trampling of fundamental rights of women today than what is happening in Afghanistan under the iron rule of the Taliban.

Just stop for a minute and think about how women used to make up almost half of Afghan doctors, and now they are forbidden to practice medicine. They used to be half the teachers; now they are barred from teaching. The girls used to go regularly to school; now the doors of those schools are slammed shut.

And we've heard, all of us, the stories of women being flogged with metal cables because a bit of ankle would be showing. We've heard of women being taken to hospital after hospital and finally dying because no care could be given because there were no women doctors and no male doctor could be permitted to treat the woman. Now that is the most extreme example we can point to, but clearly it is an example that we must carefully examine because it is being justified in the name of culture and tradition. It is, as the Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, often says, "no longer acceptable to say that the abuse and mistreatment of women is cultural -- it should be called what it is: criminal." And it should be addressed by individual leaders in societies and by all of us through the United Nations and other multi-lateral efforts. I am pleased that a campaign started here in the United States is aimed at improving educational opportunities for Afghan girls, primarily in refugee camps outside the borders of that country.

I also believe that we have to take a much stronger stand against the trafficking of women and girls, which is another international human rights violation that will continue to haunt us into the 21st century if we do not act now. An estimated one to two million women and girls -- the numbers are hard to find as you might guess -- are trafficked every year around the world, forced into labor, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. Women sold as domestics and slaves in illegal sweatshops are sometimes literally worked to death, and women and children trafficked into the sex industry are often exposed to deadly diseases such as HIV and AIDS.

I have spoken to young girls in northern Thailand whose parents were persuaded to sell them as prostitutes, and they received a great deal of money by their standards. You could often tell the home of where girls had been sold because they might even have a satellite dish or an addition built onto the house. But I met the girls who had come home after they had been used up, after they had contracted HIV and AIDS. If you've ever held the hand of a 13-year-old girl dying of AIDS, you can understand how critical it is that we take every step possible to prevent this happening to any other girl anywhere in the world. I also, in the Ukraine, heard of women who told me with tears running down their faces that young women in their communities were disappearing. They answered ads that promised a much better future in another place and they were never heard from again.

This is an international criminal activity, with traffickers operating boldly across international borders. But we are finally as a world beginning to address it.

Next week in Vienna, the United Nations will be negotiating a protocol on trafficking in women and children as part of the Organized Crime Convention, and all of us have a stake in making sure that this new instrument of international cooperation will set standards for our efforts to prevent trafficking, punish traffickers and protect victims, and strengthen the global fight to end this pervasive human rights violation and transnational criminal problem. The United States government is working closely with the governments of Italy, Israel, Finland and the Ukraine on this critical issue -- and I invite other countries to join as well.

Another powerful lesson we will take with us into the next century is that for women to

advance, democracy must advance as well. The rights that we hold precious as human beings -- freedom of conscience, religion, association -- can only be protected and expanded if there is a civil society, if there is a democracy in which those rights are embedded.

And we know that democracy means more than elections -- as important as they are. We have to be willing to support institutions such as labor unions, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, a free press, that will help make sure that the results of elections actually bring about fair legal systems, independent judiciaries, and that basic rights and freedoms are once again -- if they ever had been -- implemented.

I think that the kind of work that the United Nations has done on issues from domestic violence to population to development will continue, and in many ways gain greater support, in the years to come. Because after all, as we have learned the lessons about what importance we must place on the role of women, we know that we must continue to speak out on our own and to hear the voices of others. I will try as I travel to listen to those voices and amplify them.

I'm delighted that in a few weeks I will be privileged to travel to Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, to see firsthand the progress that women are making in that region of the world, and to better understand the challenges they continue to face. I am very much looking forward to that trip because I know that in those countries as in all others I have visited I will be inspired by and educated by and really transformed by the stories that I hear.

I was also pleased that last June, during the President's trip to China, we were able to announce that the United States would sponsor a series of exchange programs to bring Chinese women together with their counterparts here in the United States. And I am very pleased that the first delegation has just arrived -- a diverse group that includes a woman who runs a cable station, another who runs a women's hotline, and a remarkable lawyer I met who is the head of a women's law clinic in Beijing.

There are stories and individuals like that everywhere, and I was pleased that with the strong support of the United States Information Agency, the President's budget will include funding to continue this China/American exchange into the coming year.

You know, it was in preparation for the trip to China that I first heard that wonderful saying that, "Women hold up half the sky." It's a powerful image of what women do every single day, in every country, as we struggle to raise families, pass on our values, and participate fully in the life of our communities.

That saying, in different forms, is found in the culture of our own Native Americans and in many other cultures around the world. It really describes not only the reality, but the hope as well. So as we move toward this 21st century, let us acknowledge that women cannot hold up half the sky if they are robbed of the education they deserve to have and denied the right to go to school. They cannot hold up half the sky if they don't have access to the credit, the loans, and

the jobs they need to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. They cannot hold up half the sky if they are victims of abuse in their own homes, or kidnaped and become objects of war or sold into marriage, slavery or other disastrous life circumstances. Women cannot hold up half the sky if they are denied the freedom to plan their own families, if they are denied their basic legal rights. Women can only hold up half the sky -- as this wonderful, wonderful sculptress suggests to us -- if their feet are planted firmly on the soil of freedom and equal justice.

My hope is that into the next century we will not only continue to see progress, but advancements in every part of the world. We will see a world in which all citizens -- men and women -- enjoy the freedoms of liberty; in which all children are valued and given equal opportunities whether they are boys or girls; and in which every citizen can live in dignity, free from fear, and filled with hope. Only then will we be able to say -- with honesty -- that yes, women not only can but do hold up half the sky. And that sky over all of us is filled with a bright future for our boys and, especially, our girls.

Thank you very much.