

11-19-00  
Vietnamese Mission

Speech to Vietnamese Women

Ho Chi Minh City

November 19, 2000

... and I thank you for having all the children here to greet and welcome us today.

It is hard to believe that the President's visit to Vietnam will be coming to an end in a few hours. This has been a very special few days for my husband, my daughter, my mother and me. That is in large part because of the warm welcome we've received. First in Hanoi and now in Ho Chi Minh City. I am very grateful to the government and to the citizens, who lined the streets to greet us, who stopped their bicycles and mopeds, to smile and waved to us as we passed by. It is hard not to notice how young and enthusiastic this country is. And what great promise the people of Vietnam have for the future they are creating.

I must admit that over the last few days I have found myself overcome by emotion on many occasions when I thought about how dramatically our relationship has changed since my own youth -- when our countries were at war. Back then, I never could have imagined that the United States and Vietnam would sign the historic Bilateral Trade Agreement this past summer. Nor could I have imagined seeing what I saw yesterday when Vietnamese and Americans were working side by side in a rice field, at an excavation site, to find the remains of an American pilot. His two sons were right there, looking on, and hoping that, after all these years, they will finally be able to bring their father home.

We will never erase the past -- or ease the pain once felt, not only by men, but by the women in Vietnam and America, who, like those throughout history, held their families and countries together during the conflicts. Decades ago, women in both our countries were united by their shared pain. Today, we are joined by a shared vision of a better future for our daughters and sons.

Although this will be one of our family's last trips overseas while my husband is President. I'm so pleased we could come to Vietnam on this historic visit at this time to strengthen our friendship between our government and most importantly between our people. For me it has been a special pleasure to see first hand the critical role that women are playing in building a more prosperous Vietnam.

When we landed in Hanoi, and drove in from the airport, I saw women scattered through the beautiful green fields, working the land. And then I went shopping and I saw many women running successful businesses in Hanoi and now today in Ho Chi Minh City. As I visited with the women and as I watched them work I know how much women were contributing to the economy and society of Vietnam.

Yesterday, I met with women leaders in Hanoi. Leaders in law, government, business, health care, labor, education, and every sector of society. We held a panel discussion at the history museum. One of the women who spoke had left home at 16, and studied in Russia. For six years, she didn't see her family. Later, she went to the United States to the Harvard Law School, and yet after having being to Russia and to the United States she could not wait till she returned to Vietnam. Where, like so many young people I've met she wanted to make a difference for her country. Today, she works at the United Nations Development Program improving labor law, and working for justice for all.

Another woman at the forum yesterday was from Ho Chi Minh City. She is the head of R.E.E., one of the first state enterprises to be privatized and listed on the new Vietnam Stock Exchange. She was a very impressive businesswoman who represents the promises of your new economy. And yet, she told us that it wasn't easy to persuade the people around her that equitization was the right route to go. But her hard work and her vision, her dream of the future has paid off. The size of her workforce has more than tripled, her stock value of her company has multiplied 20 times over, and her employees have better pay and working conditions.

Sitting next to this successful woman was a 15 year-old girl who has traveled the world representing Vietnam. She told us that she thought that the title of our forum -- challenges and opportunities -- left something out. It needed to include dreams as well because young people shouldn't be limited by today's opportunities and challenges but should have the confidence as we saw the children here earlier to dream what is possible for themselves and their society. The young woman yesterday and the children today can dream of what is possible because of the new experiences that have come with changing times. But also because of their mothers, their grandmothers, and great-grandmothers who cleared the path before them.

Every time a woman is elected to political office, or wins an Olympic medal, or creates a business, she is breaking barriers and paying honor to those who came before. In this room today there are many who have struggled and sacrificed so that their daughters and sons could live their dreams. And women have played a very important role, for thousands of years in the history of Vietnam. I've read about the Hi-Bah-Choong sisters who led an army of 80,000 against the Chinese occupants. And about Bah-Chew, who was described as 9 feet tall and able to walk 500 leagues in a day. Now that is often said about woman who are able to managed the many stresses of our daily lives. Sometimes we all feel we must be 9 feet tall just to do the work that has to be done.

In the Vietnamese Women's Museum in Hanoi, visitors are greeted by a towering gold statue of a Vietnamese mother, graceful and beaming with confidence. On her shoulder is a young child, arms outstretched, like the children we saw, who are singing to make this earth their own. Inside that museum are images of many of the women who built Vietnam in your fields and factories, in your homes and on your battlefields. One of its most extensive exhibits is devoted to the large group of women from all over Vietnam and from every walk of life who traveled, in 1995, to the United Nations 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in Beijing and the NGO Forum in Hairou. That brought together 50,000 women from all over the world who were committed to improving the lives of women in their own countries.

I know some of you went to that conference, both the official conference and the NGO forum. I was fortunate to speak at both. When I spoke at the NGO Forum in Hanoi many people were stuck in the rain and turned away. But, I remember seeing a large group of Vietnamese women who made it inside the hall. I was told that they had waited in line since four o'clock in the morning. It demonstrated once again the resilience and creativity of Vietnam women. I will always be touched by that.

And I will never forget the variety of banners that stretched across the Great Wall. Some of the Vietnamese banners depicted women working in the fields and yearning for peace. Like all the banners from all over the world, the Vietnamese women had stitched into their banners their cultures and histories, their hopes and dreams. The theme of these banners was "Women Weaving the World Together." And that is, what women have always done, and what women particularly have been doing since the Beijing conference. Because while the delegates to the women's conference might have worn different clothing, or spoke different languages, and came from different communities, we all spoke in the same mother tongue. Wanting the same things in life for ourselves and our families.

In one voice we proclaimed for the world to hear that, in this century, economic progress depends on the progress of women. Political process depends on the progress of women. And that women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights. Although we said that, there are some who can't understand what it means. I remember being on a Voice of America radio program after the conference. A man called from the Middle East and he asked me the following question: "What did you mean by saying that women's rights were human rights?" I asked him to close his eyes for a minute and think of all the rights that he, as a man took for granted: the right to education, the right to health care, the right to live free from violence in one's home or walking down the street, the right to be treated with dignity, to express one's feelings freely, to be heard. The right, in a word, to be fully human.

Those are the rights that women want. And the reason we want them is not just to be part of a political movement. It is so that we can help weave together our families, communities, our countries and indeed our world into a global tapestry of equality and justice that we are proud to call our own.

I'm told there is a Vietnamese saying that "One day's journey harvests a basket of wisdom." Well that was certainly true of the journey many of us took five years ago. We broke centuries of silence to speak out on issues that mattered most in our lives. To measure ourselves against the rest of the world, and take comfort in the fact that we were not alone in the challenges and problems we faced. We could agree to a Platform for Action, so that in the future, inaction and regression on women's rights would be viewed as a violation of the promises agreed to. And when the delegates went home, they could bring along this platform as a road map to measure their progress.

I want to commend the women of Vietnam for working so hard to fulfill the Beijing commitments. In many ways, you are part of a new movement. Because, where before women too often worked in isolation, increasingly we are working together, sharing ideas and blending our voices into a chorus for change.

I've heard those voices as I've traveled the world on behalf my government's Vital Voices initiative. I've heard those voices from Kuwait, where women are fighting for the right to vote. In El Salvador, Guatemala, Kosovo, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland, places once torn apart by conflict, where women have buried too many children and husbands vow to turn their cries of "enough" into a force for peace and reconciliation. I heard those voices in South Africa. From women who were homeless squatters, but are now using loans to build more than 100 homes, a day care center, a store, and an entire community out of the dust in the ground.

And I heard those Vital Voices in Hanoi. On Friday, I visited a village outside Hanoi, and met women who are taking part in a women's union microcredit project. I talked to one woman who started out five years ago with just a \$20 dollar loan to buy a

tofu machine. She has since borrowed – and paid back – much more. Out on her patio, outside her home, she showed me with great pride the long rolls of finished tofu and the pigs who get to eat the leftovers. And how she used the money to buy new pigs to sell them in markets and then to build a new house for their family and send her children to school.

I heard many similar stories when I attended the borrowing group's weekly meeting, which took place in the DING, with a bamboo roof and yellow walls. The women, all dressed in bright pink shirts, and they stood and recited the 10 commitments they make – including improving their family's nutrition and supporting the other members of their group. The person in charge of this particular village group explained how the average income of her fellow borrowers has increased more than 300 percent. And their repayment rate is 100 percent. This Woman's Union project has allowed women to buy chickens and cattle, to get better sanitation, to build houses, send their children to school and gain confidence, often for the first time in the future.

Now when people ask me if a small loans can really matter. I say I have seen with my own eyes how much it does matter. Microcredit can lift, what every you can do to lift up the status of woman is not only good for woman it is good for children, families and society. Because as long as inequities persist – as long as women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled, subjected to violence we cannot weave together a more prosperous world. A woman's life should not be all work no play and no thanks.

Yet, if women are to weave together the world, to make it better and stronger, more just and equal, we need laws and changes in customs that will protect our rights and enhance our opportunities. We should speak out when women are blocked from owning or inheriting property or having custody of their children. We should speak out when women are stopped from organizing NGOs and creating civil society, when they are blocked from freely expressing their views.

We should speak out in the face of human rights abuses. There should be no silence when the press is muzzled, when religious freedom is suppressed, or political expression is denied. There should be no silence when rape is used as a weapon of war, or child soldiers are kidnapped from their homes or used as human shields. There should be no silence when street children are kept from school or when babies are still drowned and suffocated and abandoned simply because they are born girls.

In order to weave together this better world, we have to have access to education. And I commend Vietnam for your high literacy rate. It's important especially in a global economy to have high literacy rate so that every person has a chance to participate. What could the promise of a free market mean to the millions of girls around the world who cannot read or write, or are kept out of school because their brothers' education is considered more important?

Health care must also be viewed as a right as well. What could prosperity or human rights mean for the 600,000 women who still die during childbirth each year – or to the millions of children suffering and dying from malnutrition? Or to the woman denied family planning or prenatal care, still forced to bear children or abort them, still sterilized or circumcised against their will? And what does equality mean for the women who are doing equal work if not more work than men, but still not receiving equal pay or equal respect?

Women have always worked hard. Women have always borne both the responsibility of the family, and the need to help bring in an income to support the family. I remember driving through Sub-Saharan Africa and seeing women working in the marketplace, carrying firewood on their backs, water on their heads working in the fields and hearing a government economist say that "this work is not part of the economy. It is part of the informal economy, but it does not count." Well, I had to wonder just what those women were doing if not contributing to the economy. Just imagine what would happen if every woman who worked both in the informal economy stopped working for

just one day – did absolutely nothing inside the house or outside the house. I believe the entire world would stop working.

And so, if women are to be respected their work must be respected. Whether it is in the fields or in the National Assembly. Their choices must be respected as well. That means helping to support woman doing the most important work any of us will do – raising children -- with the other obligations that women have. Providing support such as childcare so that women are able to participate fully.

And what does equality and justice mean of the epidemic of domestic violence deprives woman of the opportunity to be fully human. Every country on earth shares this dark secret. Too often the women we see shopping at the market, working at their jobs, caring for their children, go home at night and live in fear. Not fear of an invading army or a natural disaster or even a stranger in a dark alley, but fear of the very people – their family members – who we are supposed to depend on for help. For too many women, their homes provide inadequate refuge, the law little protection, public opinion even less sympathy. That is why we have to say over and over again that violence against women should never be considered cultural or acceptable. It is criminal – and must be punished with the full force of the law. So there are many challenges that we face that we must continue to stand up and speak out about – not only to eliminate the inequities that have confronted women from the beginning of history, but also to tackle the new challenges we face.

Yesterday in our panel discussion, in Hanoi, we talked about how the global economy is here to stay. It is like a force of nature. We can complain about the weather but it is here and we have to learn to cope with it and so therefore we must learn how to deal with globalization. And to speak out for women who make up 70 percent of those living in absolute poverty, who are being exploited and abused in new ways because of the global economy.

We must speak out for the one million women and girls who, every year, are being bought and sold into modern slavery all over the world. Again, as I did yesterday, I want to commend Vietnam for working to stop trafficking, of woman and children, both nationally and regionally. How can we expect women to weave together the world if, lured by the promise of a better life, they are shipped to other countries to be abused, degraded, and enslaved? The easy buying and selling of human is one of the greatest human rights abuses facing girls and women today and one of the most tragic byproducts of the global marketplace.

Another challenge is HIV/AIDS, a disease that affects us all. Since the first case of HIV was detected here 10 years ago, I know this city has been hit hard, and the face of AIDS has grown increasingly female. But I also know that your country and Ho Chi Minh City have been fighting back. Before coming here I met with young people who, with help from Save the Children, are working in their schools to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS. They told me something very important, that is, that children have a role in fighting AIDS. I believe all of us do. It is particularly important for Vietnam to continue its leadership that has already demonstrated it standing against the epidemic of HIV/AIDS.

There is much we can accomplish together as the United States and Vietnam build on a new partnership and create a new relationship built on friendship, cooperation, and mutual respect. I am pleased to tell you that during the next five years, the United States government will provide an additional \$30 million to help Vietnam improve its detection of HIV/AIDS, and to prevent its spread.

Now, if women are going to weave together a better world, it is not enough for us just to put in place good policies. Rights don't just happen on paper. A law can be passed banning a practice, to end trafficking for example, a new program can be created, like the children working to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS but unless people's attitudes change, laws and programs can't accomplish as much as we would hope. When we talk about women's rights, we know the struggle depends upon millions of decisions we make

in our countries and around the world every day. It depends also on the words spoken by family and friends and the lessons we teach our children as we tuck them into bed at night.

The lessons I have learned over the last eight years will stay with me for the rest of my life. Although I'm ending one chapter of my life as the First Lady, I will be opening a new one in the United States Senate. I will take with me there the voices that I heard in Vietnam and throughout the world of women who are transforming their own lives, and the lives of their countries. I will bring with me the stories of the struggles and triumphs and the dreams of the women and girls of Vietnam and the world.

At the Vietnamese Women's Museum, in Hanoi, they have the winners of an art contest called "Toward Gender Equality in the Year 2000." One of the pictures there was drawn by a 7 year-old girl. And it shows a young girl driving a car full of girls. The girls are doctors and teachers, they are nurses and students and they are from all over Vietnam. And, they are driving towards their own future to fulfill their own dreams. That is a picture that I have in my mind's eye as I leave here today. Because I believe that the future of Vietnam, given the resiliency and the hard work of the Vietnamese people is bright indeed I hope that future includes a close relationship with the United States. I hope it also included a continuing conversation between the woman of the United States and the women of Vietnam so that the Vital Voices of our women can be heard together. And that the dreams we weave for our own lives will create a beautiful tapestry that makes clear to the entire world that the women of Vietnam and the United States are working together in partnership and friendship with mutual respect to meet the challenges we face to create opportunities for all and to fulfill the dreams we hold for ourselves and our children.

Thank you very much. (Applause)