

THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
TO IRISH WOMEN AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
DUBLIN, IRELAND

MRS. CLINTON: As we landed here I felt as though I had been here before although this is my very first trip to Ireland. I don't suppose one can grow up in America without knowing many Irish-Americans and without appreciating the many contributions that this culture has made to our own. And we are particularly reminded of our close ties this year because you are observing the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine. We owe something of our own history to this tragedy of yours.

Being here today, having come from Northern Ireland yesterday, I understand even more clearly the ways in which Ireland has influenced American society. And I am learning more every minute about the ways in which Irish women have influenced American society and still are today. Over the past many years, the people of this country who have come to our country, and particularly Irish women, have brought with them values that have served the test of time -- a devotion to family, an inner strength, a courage and spirit of independence that have strengthened the American way of life and our own democracy.

On behalf of the more than 40 million Americans of Irish descent, we are grateful for these close ties and for the relationship that has been built over the years. Not just between countries, but between people and families and communities.

There is so much hope today in the United States that what we saw yesterday in Belfast, a new and peaceful Ireland, will become a reality from one end to the other of this island. As I talked about what it meant to people -- to men, women and children -- to have this cease-fire, I was struck by how grateful they were for normalcy. To walk down the streets, to expect to go Christmas shopping without fear, to let their children play outside -- the blessings that we take for granted which to them are now seen as such markers for the kind of life they want to lead.

The women I spoke with yesterday are not high-level diplomats or professional negotiators; they have not yet been elected to office. They were women, Catholics and Protestants alike, whose lives and families have been affected by the

violence. They didn't wait for someone else to be organized, they didn't wait for other voices to be raised, they themselves took it upon themselves to go door to door through their neighborhoods to say, "Stop the bloodshed, this cannot go on." Their grief became their and our call to action.

These women may not be well-known across the world but they should be, because their courage and spirit is what we have to have more of if we expect to have a peaceful world for all of us. There are women like these women in the Middle East, in Bosnia and South Africa, in all of the trouble-spots around our globe. We must give them courage by reinforcing their own willingness to take risk for peace.

These are the women who every day are getting up and facing realities that we luckily only have to think about or see on the television. But it is this kind of grass-roots commitment that will stand the test of time and will make a difference. Were it not for these women, I do not know whether the cycle of violence would have been broken in Northern Ireland. If it were not for these women working tirelessly, I don't think that we would have seen as many people as we saw yesterday, who are breaking down barriers to overcome suspicions and defy history.

Their efforts remind us that building a peace is a long and difficult task -- but it is a necessary one, not just to end the bloodshed, but to put into place the building blocks that enable individuals to seek fulfillment and to live up to their own God-given potentials.

Irish women who are working for peace have found ways to make their faith a source of strength, not a source of division. By coming together, accepting each other, and creating a new community together, they are discovering what women around the globe are discovering as well: No matter how different we may be superficially, whatever religion we follow, whatever shade of color our skin might be, whatever our ethnic background, there is so much more that unites us than divides us. And if women begin talking with one another, around kitchen tables, in cafes, in the work places, we will discover that sense of shared identity.

That is what I saw at work yesterday. We must together seek a common ground and on that common ground build the kind of society that so many of you in this great hall have both worked for and prayed for.

I had the opportunity recently to read the text of a lecture that President Robinson gave a few years ago, and I was delighted to see her and her husband just a few hours ago. I thought he and I should perhaps start a club for spouses. President Robinson, as you know so well, and as the world is discovering, has offered eloquent insights into the challenges

facing men and women at this point in the history of Ireland and in the world.

Much of what she said has stuck with me but one thing in particular really made an impression. And that is that the participation of women in society requires a re-appraisal of our view of who and what is valuable in our world. As much as policies and legislation are important to women's progress and women's rights, a shifting of attitudes and values is necessary as well.

This is not to suggest that women in Ireland should not become more involved in the existing political process. Indeed, I hope many, many will, both here and particularly in the North. But it is to suggest that the work of peace, that the work of reconciliation is far too important to be left to those who are elected leaders. It is work that has to be done every single day by everyone of us.

President Robinson is an excellent example of what can be accomplished through the political process, but there are many women here and throughout this island who are not elected officials, who themselves are making great contributions. In changing our attitudes and values we have to dare to think differently -- to break through the categories that we once took for granted.

That certainly is a priority to the North, where we visited the Mackie Plant yesterday morning. Protestant and Catholic workers still enter by separate entrances and then work together on the shop floor. It is certainly true in our own country, where we battle against the divide of race and ethnicity, and even sometimes religion, as we struggle every day to make America live up to its ideals.

It is certainly the case in Bosnia, where, when the forces go in to implement the peace that the political leaders have made, real peace will only come because individuals, Croats and Serbs and Muslims, will decide that they have had enough of the bloodshed, and that the games on the military battlefield are not worth the heartbreak and the loss and their children's lives.

Like some of you, I was fortunate enough to attend the United Nations Conference in Beijing. And there I looked out at women from every corner of the world, some of whom are up against odds that I cannot even imagine. They see their little sisters and their daughters being denied food and medical care, and dying before they are five years of age.

They live in places where girls still are not permitted or encouraged to attend school, or if they do, the schooling ends much too early. They come from societies where women still are

not even allowed to vote, or if they are, it is only on paper because there is not encouragement or full participation in the political process.

When I meet women like that, I must confess that I am very humbled. And I'm overwhelmed by my own blessings in the United States, but a little sad that so many of us do not take advantage of all the opportunities that we have -- both for ourselves and for all those around us.

That conference focused attention on the plight of women around the world but it also, I think, has reminded those of us in countries like Ireland and the United States, that we have much work to be done here as well.

Those of us who enjoy the opportunities of health care, or jobs, or credit, or legal and political rights, have to recognize that so many others among us do not, even within our own societies. I can go places in my own country where, because of poverty and lost opportunities, I see the results of lives that have been squandered, families broken and futures destroyed.

I believe, with all my heart, that women are the world's greatest untapped resource. And that resource too often is being wasted today. Each of us in our lives knows that we can begin to unleash the full power and glory of women's potential.

What must change in order for us to do that? First, in our everyday lives, we must begin to respect the dignity of each person and overcome assumptions, presumptions, prejudices and prejudgments about who we are and what we stand for.

And there certainly must be a truce among women. We should no longer be making judgements about one another because of the choices we have made. We should respect and strengthen and support each other; those who choose to be full-time in the home, those who choose to be full-time in the world of work, and those, like me and many of you, who attempt to compose a life that consists of both the responsibilities in the home and the work-place.

It does not do us any good to be pointing fingers or making assumptions about what kind of mother someone is who works outside of the home or what kind of loss someone has experienced because she chose not to.

Let us celebrate the contributions of every woman, instead of pigeon-holing and categorizing women in ways that limit their and our potential. There is no formula that I'm aware of for being a successful or fulfilled woman today. Now perhaps it would be easier if there were. If we could be handed a pattern and cut it out, as our mothers and grandmothers and foremothers

were, that would be, I suppose, easier -- just to make a quilt that looked like everyone else's. But that is not the way it is today and I am glad it is not.

I like and relish diversity in the lives of women today. I am pleased that I am living in this time, as difficult as it is, because I want to know who I fully am, and I want to help other women to make that choice as well. Having choices means having responsibilities, having obligations, as Mrs. Green said, accepting consequences. But if women are to be full and equal partners in the life of society and the life of the family, that's what independence and responsibility needs.

Before coming here today someone told me the story of an incoming group of women members of Parliament who were interviewed by a prominent television talk show host a few years ago. And one of the first questions was: "Who is minding the children?"

I have two responses to that. The first is, I long for the day when men are asked the same question. Women and children need men to be full participants in the raising of children. And men, if only they knew, need the opportunity and joy of being those participants in their own families.

My second response is that I wish that when women are asked questions like that, they would be phrased somewhat differently. So that instead of being asked that way, the question might instead be put, "Do you have child care that is accessible, affordable, safe and dependable, and if not, what can we all do through society, to make sure that children are well cared for and that you are given the sense of security that, as a working mother, you should have?"

To truly respect a woman means to respect the choices she makes for herself and her family. That means all choices, and it means providing the kind of support and respect those choices deserve.

Too often we fall into the trap of thinking that so-called "women's issues" only affect women. But if we truly care about strong families, strong communities, and strong societies, we must recognize that men and women should complement each other inside and outside the home. Men and women must not be consigned to opposite poles; we must be partners in a common enterprise for the good of us all, and particularly our children.

Along with a change in personal attitudes and values, every second in society can affect positive changes that empower and educate women to take this responsibility for themselves and their choices.

Schools, for example, could be more flexible in providing opportunities for women who raise children. Life-long learning is essential in the global economy. So many women in our world did what was expected of them: they had their children early in their late teens and twenties, then wanted to go back to school to further their own educations and contribute to their family's income. Perhaps they became the sole bread-winner in a family. Still, they find it nearly impossible in my country and in many others, to care for their families, make a living and pursue their educations.

Businesses can initiate policies, and I fully hope they will, that will make work more family-friendly. We are making it as difficult as possible for men and women to be both good workers and good parents. Modern technology should mean that more men and women can work at home. That should be encouraged where appropriate. But also, setting schedules and making it easier to find and provide child care should be considered. Businesses, at the very least, can value women by paying them equal salaries for equal work everywhere in the world.

The law enforcement and justice systems can act more efficiently to protect women from violations of their legal rights, particularly from violence in their homes. Violence in the home is a leading cause of death world-wide among women between the ages of 14 and 44.

I recently read an article from one of your newspapers about domestic violence here in Ireland. And I was very pleased to read the comments of Minister Owen, who said that both "violence against women is a crime It cannot be explained away" as some sort of "family difficulty or some other euphemism." Let us call it what it is, it is a crime and it should be treated as a crime and the perpetrators should be prosecuted, whether they are in the United States, Ireland, or anywhere in the world.

So many of the challenges families and particularly women face are rooted in poverty and an absence of economic opportunity. Financial institutions can address this problem by serving all people, even if they are poor, live in remote areas, or are women. I have visited places in the world where women are living in abject poverty but because someone held out a helping hand, with credit, they were able to buy another milk cow, to buy a woodshop for their husband, to sink a well. And all of a sudden, they not only had more income, they had the dignity that comes to someone who is lifting herself out of poverty.

In every one of these cases that I know of, where these kinds of investments are being made, women are proving to be very good credit risks. They repay their loans above ninety-five percent. Many of our large financial institutions should be very happy to have that kind of return on an investment. But instead

they are stuck in old ways of thinking. We need now to act on the evidence that we have that women who are given access to credit through modest loans are starting small businesses, working out of their homes and eventually employing others.

And just yesterday, I saw the same kind of initiative in action at the Women's Information Drop In Center in Belfast. That organization began in opposition to violence but has evolved into an umbrella for many different organizations that promote economic and educational opportunities for women.

These women have seized this moment in history to address the root causes of violence, the lack of economic opportunity and social deprivation; the absence of jobs that have moved elsewhere; industries that are no longer competitive in the global economy; the absence of higher education or lack of child care or credit.

We met in a restaurant called Ye Olde Lamplighter. It was established only five years ago and now provides jobs for seven local people. It is just one of many examples I have heard about where women coming together have made a difference.

We should not be surprised that women are leading the way, not only in putting a stop to violence but in coming up with new and effective ways to achieve their own potential and contribute to the lives of their families, communities and nations.

As the great poet Katharine Tynan, writing about Irish women, observed so keenly in her poem, "Any Woman":

"I am the pillars of the house;
The keystone of the arch am I.
Take me away, and roof and wall
Would fall to ruin utterly."

The strength and support of Irish women is critical to future peace and prosperity across this land. Your struggles are specific, but they reflect the many common struggles that women -- and men -- face around the world.

As you move forward here and to the North, please know that millions and millions of American women and men will be with you in spirit. And we will stand with you as you take risks for peace and reconciliation. We will move together with you for a more just society that we believe will benefit all people and particularly our children.

Thank you for the work you are doing, the inspiration that you give so many of us, and for the hope that has been lit this Christmas Season because of what we have seen these last days.

Thank you and Godspeed.

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