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Hillary Clinton

Address to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women



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Thank you. Thank you to Ambassador Alex Wolff and to our U.S. Mission here at the United Nations. And it's wonderful to be back at the United Nations for this occasion.

I want to thank the deputy secretary general for being with us. I'm very pleased that my friend and someone who once represented the United States here before becoming Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, could join us; members of the diplomatic corps and representatives to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women; many of my friends, elected officials from New York, including Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, who has been recognized and who is a great champion of women's rights and responsibilities -- and to all of you. This final day of the 54th session of the UN Commission brings to a close a week of a lot of activity, and it reminds us of the work that still lies ahead.

Fifteen years ago, delegates from 189 countries met in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women. It was a call to action -- a call to the global community to work for the laws, reforms, and social changes necessary to ensure that women and girls everywhere finally have the opportunities they deserve to fulfill their own God-given potentials and contribute fully to the progress and prosperity of their societies.

For many of us in this room today, that was a call to action that we have heeded. I know some of you have made it the cause of your life. You have worked tirelessly, day in and day out, to translate those words into realities. And we have seen the evidence of such efforts everywhere.

In South Africa, women living in shanty towns came together to build a housing development outside Cape Town all on their own, brick by brick. And today, their community has grown to more than 50,000 homes for low income families, most of them female-headed.



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In Liberia, a group of church women began a prayer movement to stop their country's brutal civil war. It grew to include thousands of women who helped force the two sides to negotiate a peace agreement. And then, those women helped elect Ellen Johnson Sirleaf president, the first woman to lead an African nation.

In the United States, a young woman had an idea for a website where anyone could help a small business on the other side of the world get off the ground. And today, the organization she co-founded, Kiva, has given more than \$120 million in microloans to entrepreneurs in developing countries, 80 percent of them women.

So as we meet here in New York, women worldwide are working hard to do their part to improve the status of women and girls. And in so doing, they are also improving the status of families, communities, and countries. They are running domestic violence shelters and fighting human trafficking. They are rescuing girls from brothels in Cambodia and campaigning for public office in Kuwait. They are healing women injured in childbirth in Ethiopia, providing legal aid to women in China, and running schools for refugees from Burma. They are rebuilding homes and re-stitching communities in the aftermath of the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile. And they are literally leaving their marks on the world. For example, thanks to the environmental movement started by Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai, 45 million trees are now standing tall across Kenya, most of them planted by women.

And even young girls have been empowered to stand up for their rights in ways that were once unthinkable. In Yemen, a 10-year-old girl forced to marry a much older man made headlines around the world by marching into court and demanding that she be granted a divorce, which she received. And her courage helped to shine a spotlight on the continuing practice of child marriage in that country and elsewhere.

Now, these are just a few of the stories, and everyone here could stand up and tell even more. These are the stories of what women around the world do every day to confront injustice, to solve crises, propel economies, improve living conditions, and promote peace. Women have shown time and again that they will seize opportunities to improve their own and their families' lives. And even when it seems that no opportunity exists, they still find a way. And thanks to the hard work and persistence of women and men, we have made real gains toward meeting the goals set in Beijing.

Today, more girls are in school. More women hold jobs and serve in public office. And as women have gained the chance to work, learn, and participate in their societies, their economic, political, and social contributions have multiplied. In many countries, laws that once permitted the unequal treatment of women have been replaced by laws that recognize their equality, although for too many, laws that exist on the books are not yet borne out in their daily lives.

But the progress we have made in the past 15 years is by no means the end of the story. It is, maybe, if we're really lucky, the end of the beginning. There is still so much more to be done. We have to write the next chapter to fully realize the dreams and potential that we set forth in Beijing. Because for too many millions and millions of girls and women, opportunity remains out of reach. Women are still the majority of the world's poor, the uneducated, the unhealthy, the unfed. In too many places, women are treated not as full and equal human beings with their own rights and aspirations, but as lesser creatures undeserving of the treatment and respect accorded to their husbands, their fathers, and their sons.



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Women are the majority of the world's farmers, but are often forbidden from owning the land they tend to every day, or accessing the credit they need to invest in those farms and make them more productive.

Women care for the world's sick, but women and girls are less likely to get treatment when they are sick.

Women raise the world's children, but too often receive inadequate care when they give birth. And as a result, childbirth remains a leading cause of death and injury to women worldwide.

Women rarely cause armed conflicts, but they always suffer their consequences. And when warring sides sit at one table to negotiate peace, women are often excluded, even though it is their future and their children's future that is being decided.

Though many countries have passed laws to deter violence against women, it remains a global pandemic. Women and girls are bought and sold to settle debts and resolve disputes. They are raped as both a tactic and a prize of armed conflict. They are beaten as punishment for disobedience and as a warning to other women who might assert their rights. And millions of women and girls are enslaved in brothels, forced to work as prostitutes, while police officers pocket bribes and look the other way.

Women may be particularly vulnerable to human rights violations like these. But we also know that in many places, women now are leading the fight to protect and promote human rights for everyone. With us today are several women I was proud to honor earlier this week at this year's United States State Department's International Women of Courage Awards. They have endured isolation and intimidation, violence and imprisonment, and even risked their lives to advance justice and freedom for others. And though they may work in lonely circumstances, these women, and those like them around the world, are not alone. Let them know that every one of us and the many others whom we represent are standing with them as they wage their lonely but essential efforts on behalf of us all.

The status of the world's women is not only a matter of morality and justice. It is also a political, economic, and social imperative. Put simply, the world cannot make lasting progress if women and girls in the 21st century are denied their rights and left behind.

The other day I heard *The New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof, who has done so much to bring to a wide audience the stories of individual women who are working and suffering because of conditions under which they are oppressed. And he said, you know, in the 19th century, the great moral imperative was the fight against slavery. And in the 20th century, it was the fight against totalitarianism. And in the 21st century, it is the fight for women's equality. He was right, and we must accept -- and promote that fundamental truth.

Now, I know there are those -- hard to believe -- but there are those who still dispute the importance of women to local, national, and global progress. But the evidence is irrefutable. When women are free to develop their talents, all people benefit: women and men, girls and boys. When women are free to vote and run for public office, governments are more effective and responsive to their people. When women are free to earn a living and start small businesses, the data is clear: they become key drivers of economic growth across regions and sectors. When women are given the opportunity of education and access to health care, their families and communities prosper. And when women have equal rights, nations are more stable, peaceful, and secure.



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In 1995, in one voice, the world declared human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights. And for many, those words have translated into concrete actions. But for others they remain a distant aspiration. Change on a global scale cannot and does not happen overnight. It takes time, patience, and persistence. And as hard as we have worked these past 15 years, we have more work to do.

So today, let us renew our commitment to finishing the job. And let us intensify our efforts because it is both the right thing to do and it is the smart thing as well. We must declare with one voice that women's progress is human progress, and human progress is women's progress once and for all.

This principle was enshrined 10 years ago in Millennium Development Goal Number 3, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. And that goal is essential for the realization of every other goal. Today, this principle is also at the heart of the foreign policy of the United States. We believe that women are critical to solving virtually every challenge we face as individual nations and as a community of nations. Strategies that ignore the lives and contributions of women have little chance of succeeding. So in the Obama Administration, we are integrating women throughout our work around the world.

We are consulting with women as we design and implement our policies. We are taking into greater account how those policies will impact women and girls. And we are working to identify women leaders and potential leaders around the world to make them our partners and to help support their work. And we are measuring progress, in part, by how much we improve the conditions of the lives of women and girls.

This isn't window dressing, and it's not just good politics. President Obama and I believe that the subjugation of women is a threat to the national security of the United States. It is also a threat to the common security of our world, because the suffering and denial of the rights of women and the instability of nations go hand in hand.

The United States is implementing this approach in our strategy in Afghanistan. As I said in London in January at the International Conference on Afghanistan, the women of Afghanistan have to be involved at every step in securing and rebuilding their country. Our stabilization strategy for both Afghanistan and Pakistan includes a Women's Action Plan that promotes women's leadership in both the public and private sectors; increases their access to education, health, and justice; and generates jobs for women, especially in agriculture.

This focus on women has even been embraced by the United States Military. All-women teams of Marines will be meeting with Afghan women in their homes to assess their needs. Congress has joined this focus as well. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under Chairman John Kerry, empowered a subcommittee charged with global women's issues that recently held hearings on promoting opportunity for Afghan women and girls.

History has taught us that any peace not built by and for women is far less likely to deliver real and lasting benefits. As we have seen from Guatemala to Northern Ireland to Bosnia, women can be powerful peacemakers, willing to reach across deep divides to find common ground. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 reflects this principle.



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Now, we must work together to render it into action and achieve the full participation of women as equal partners in peace. And as women continue to advocate for peace, even risking their lives to achieve it, many are praying that we will keep the promise we made in Resolution 1888 to take significant steps to end sexual violence against women and children in conflict.

We have begun the process laid out in the resolution. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has appointed a special representative. Now we must press ahead to end forever the evil of rape in conflict, which has caused suffering beyond imagination for victims and their families.

For the United States, women are also central to our ongoing work to elevate development as a key pillar of our foreign policy alongside diplomacy and defense. As those who grow the world's food, collect the water, gather the firewood, wash the clothes, and increasingly, work in the factories, run the shops, launch the businesses, and create jobs, women are powerful forces for any country's economic growth and social progress. So our development strategies must reflect their roles and the benefits they bring.

Three major foreign policy initiatives illustrate our commitment. The first is our Global Health Initiative, a \$63 billion commitment to improve health and strengthen health systems worldwide. Improving global health is an enormous undertaking, so we are focusing first on those people whose health has the biggest impact on families and communities -- women and girls. We aim to reduce maternal and child mortality and increase access to family planning. And we especially commend the commission and the UN's adoption by consensus of the resolution on maternal mortality.

We also intend to further reduce the numbers of new HIV infections. AIDS has now become a woman's disease, passed from men to women and too often, to children. Through our Global Health Initiative and our continued work through PEPFAR, we hope to stop that deadly progression by giving women and girls the tools and knowledge they need to protect themselves, and by treating HIV-positive mothers so they are less likely to pass on the disease to their children.

Our global food security program, which I previewed here at the United Nations last September, is a \$3.5 billion commitment to strengthen the world's food supply, so farmers can earn enough to support their families and food can be available more broadly. And women are integral to this mission. Most of the world's food is grown, harvested, stored, and prepared by women, often in extremely difficult conditions. They face droughts, floods, storms, pests without the fertilizers or enriched seeds that farmers in wealthy countries use. Many consider themselves lucky if they can scratch out a harvest sufficient to feed their children. Giving these women the tools and the training to grow more food and the opportunity to get that food to a market where it can be sold will have a transformative impact on their lives and it will grow the economies of so many countries.

I have to confess that when we started our Food Security Initiative, I did not know that most food was grown by women. I remember once driving through Africa with a group of distinguished experts. And I saw women working in the fields and I saw women working in the markets and I saw women with wood on their heads and water on their heads and children on their backs. And I remarked that women just seem to be working all the time. And one of the economists said, "But it doesn't count." I said, "How can you say that?" He said, "Well, it's not part of the formal economy." I said, "Well, if every woman who did all that work stopped tomorrow, the formal economy would collapse."



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A third initiative is our government's response to the challenge of climate change. In Copenhagen in December, I announced that the United States would work with other countries to mobilize \$100 billion a year by 2020 to address the climate needs of developing countries.

The effects of climate change will be felt by us all, but women in developing countries will be particularly hard hit, because as all of the changes of weather go on to produce more drought conditions and more storms and more floods, the women will have to work even harder to produce food and walk even farther to find water safe for drinking. They are on the front lines of this crisis, which makes them key partners and problem solvers. So we believe we must increase women's access to adaptation and mitigation technologies and programs so they can protect their families and help us all meet this global challenge.

These initiatives amount to more than an assortment of programs designed with women in mind. They reflect a fundamental shift in U.S. policy, one that is taking place in offices across Washington and in our embassies around the globe. But we are still called to do more -- every single one of us. The Obama Administration will continue to work for the ratification of CEDAW.

Now, I don't have to tell those of you who are Americans how hard this is. But we are determined, because we believe it is past time, to take this step for women in our country and in all countries. Here at the United Nations, a single, vibrant agency dedicated to women -- run by a strong leader with a seat at the secretary general's table, would help galvanize the greater levels of coordination and commitment that the women of the world deserve.

And as the United Nations strives to better support the world's women, it would benefit from having more women in more of its leadership positions. Just as there are talented women working unnoticed in every corner of the world, there are women with great talent and experience whose potential leadership is still largely untapped, and they deserve the chance to serve and lead.

The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action was not only a pledge to help women in other lands, it was also a promise by all countries to do more to advance opportunity and equality for our own citizens. Because in every country on earth, talent is universal, but opportunity is not. In my travels across the United States, I've met women for whom higher education is a distant dream. They have the talent, they have the drive, but they don't have the money. I've met mothers trapped in abusive relationships desperate to escape with their children, but with no means of support. I've met too many women who cannot afford necessary healthcare for themselves and their children. And I've met girls who have heard their whole lives that they were less than -- less talented, less worthy of respect -- until they eventually came to believe it was true.

So whether we live in New York or New Delhi, Lagos or La Paz, women and girls share many of the same struggles and aspirations. The principle of women's equality is a simple, self-evident truth, but the work of turning that principle into practice is rarely simple. It takes years and even generations of patient, persistent work, not only to change a country's laws, but to change its people's minds, to weave throughout culture and tradition in public discourse and private views the unassailable fact of women's worth and women's rights.



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Some of you may have seen the cover of the most recent issue of *The Economist*. If you haven't, I commend it to you. And like me, you may do a double-take. Because I looked quickly at it and I thought it said "genocide." And then I looked more carefully at it, and it said "gendercide." Because it was pointing out the uncomfortable fact that there are approximately 100 million fewer girls than there should be, if one looked at all the population data. I was so struck by that: a word that I had never heard before, but which so tragically describes what has gone on, what we have let go on, in our world.

My daughter is here with me today -- and being the mother of a daughter is a great inspiration and motivation for caring about the girls of the world. And I would hope that we would want not only for our own daughters the opportunities that we know would give them the chance to make the most of their lives, to fulfill that God-given potential that resides within each of us, but that we would recognize doing the same for other daughters of mothers and fathers everywhere would make the world a safer and better place for our own children.

So we must measure our progress not by what we say in great venues like this, but in how well we are able to improve the condition of women's lives, some near at hand who deserve the opportunities many of us take for granted, some in far distant cities and remote villages -- women we are not likely ever to meet but whose lives will be shaped by our actions.

Let us recommit ourselves, as individuals, as nations, as the United Nations, to build upon the progress of the past and achieve once and for all that principle that we all believe in, or we would not be here today. The rights and opportunities of all women and girls deserve our attention and our support because as they make progress, then the progress that should be the birthright of future generations will be more likely, and the 21st century will fulfill the promise that we hold out today. So let's go forth and be reenergized in the work that lies ahead.

Thank you all very much.