



**Speech by
The Honorable Mary Robinson,
Former President of Ireland and
Former UN High Commissioner for
Human Rights,
delivered to the
Women as Global Leaders Conference,
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Women: Finding a voice where they found a vision

I am delighted to participate in this conference which has brought together established and emerging women leaders from over 70 countries. I congratulate Zayed University on your vision and organizing skills. Now we have to make sure that this is a conference which really makes a difference – so that we live up to your vision!

I am proud to be here as current Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders. The Council comprises all of the current elected women Presidents and Prime Ministers and most of the past office holders. We are dedicated to making women's leadership both visible and vocal. As a way of doing this we have facilitated, under Secretary Madeleine Albright as Chair, the establishment of networks of Women Ministers such as Women Ministers of Environment, of Health, of Trade and Finance and of Women's Affairs who have been meeting at regular intervals to discuss issues of concern and priority for women. Each network is co-chaired by a Minister from a developed and a developing country, and we also offer practical help to women in new ministries, such as the Minister for Women's Affairs in Iraq.

The title I chose today – *Women: finding a voice where they found a vision* comes from a poem written by a distinguished Irish poet Eavan Boland who is currently a Professor at Stanford University in the United States. Her words symbolize the important message – that not only must women be more present in positions of leadership, but they must have their own vision and commitment which will make a difference.

As the first woman President of Ireland, it won't surprise you that I thought and spoke a great deal about the changing role of women at home and around the world. I often remarked that the cause of women is inseparable from the cause of humanity itself. A society that is without the voice and vision of women is not less feminine. It is less human.

So it would be right to ask, at this important conference on women as global leaders, have we succeeded in advancing human progress through the progress of women? Have we listened enough to the voices of women, particularly here in the Arab world? Have we done enough to make a difference in their lives?

At a number of events during 2005, to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Beijing World Conference on Women, I reflected on the future of human rights, and women's rights in particular. I spoke of the continuing violence against women in many societies, the unspeakable practice of trafficking in women, and the continuing struggle against the grinding poverty and exclusion which eight-hundred million women - representing two thirds of those living on less than a dollar a day – faced in their lives.

I wish I could say that the situation is improving. But the reality is that for millions of women things may be even worse. Reports show that the numbers of women victimised by trafficking are on the rise, resources for family planning assistance have been slashed, and the scourge of HIV/AIDS increasingly strikes women in a growing number of countries. Added to this bleak picture, the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the US almost five years ago has cast a shadow on human rights. Undemocratic regimes have used the tragedy in the United States to pursue their own repressive policies. Democratic governments – including the US itself - have taken measures that run counter to their own commitments under international law.

But despite the many challenges, I am convinced that women will prevail. They will continue the work to make human rights - their rights, their children's rights - a reality. I have seen for myself how women in every region are increasingly using the international human rights standards that their governments have accepted to press for change. It is encouraging to see the changes to empower women taking place in a number of countries in this region. Even more encouraging is the quality of the women coming forward to accept responsibility and give leadership.

So I welcome the opportunity to reflect on how this is happening and why I believe encouraging women's leadership holds such promise for so many. I would also like to use my remarks to begin a dialogue with all of you on how we can build on the momentum of this conference with follow up which could contribute even more in supporting women around the world in the struggle for their rights.

Women in Action

Women's resilience and courage in situations of conflict and post conflict is remarkable. I still remember my visit to Afghanistan in March 2002 where I joined Afghan women who had gathered from every part of the country to mark International Women's Day. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my five years as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. To be in the presence of women who had lived through such deprivation and had emerged stronger was inspirational. I was reminded how rights which had taken generations for women to secure could be lost, then claimed again. I was joined by women from a number of countries, and Noeleen Heyzer of UNIFEM who had supported their Afghan Sisters.

We may forget that prior to the Taliban's 1996 takeover of the country, Afghan women were 70 percent of the schoolteachers, 40 percent of the doctors, 50 percent of civilian government workers and 50 percent of the college students in the capital, Kabul. They were scientists, professors, members of parliament and university professors. They led corporations and non-profit organizations and local communities. Clearly, these women were well-equipped to participate in leading Afghanistan back to democracy and stability, and the recent elections there showed how determined they are to make their leadership visible.

But millions of women from every corner of the globe are just beginning the journey. They are only now learning about the human rights commitments their governments have made and how they can be used to better their lives. Those of us who have pleaded equality cases through courts have seen how something written in a book and decided in a courtroom will sooner or later reverberate back into the lives of women, opening up possibilities, impacting individual circumstances.

When I worked as a lawyer before the Irish and European courts, I was fortunate enough to be involved in cases that affected the situation of Irish women. Cases which, for example, resulted in the removal of discriminatory taxation of married women, the full participation of women in the jury system in Irish courts, the introduction of legal aid, the abolition of the stigma of illegitimacy of children born outside marriage and the achievement of equal pay and equal opportunity in the workplace. I learned the value of test cases, and the equivalent of class actions at the national level.

Today, women are using the international human rights framework to engage governments and, where necessary, to shame them. I have seen for myself how women in every region are involved in practical projects, courageous activism and vital research. Whether they are combating poverty and discrimination, insisting on reproductive health, working for peace in zones of conflict or giving leadership in political and economic spheres, the fascinating development is that their approach is increasingly rights-based.

Women are using the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol; are drawing on the Convention on the Rights of the Child to support the rights of the girl child; and are utilizing the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to address issues such as the feminization of poverty. For the first time in some countries, women are recognizing that their families' futures, and indeed the development of their countries, depend to a large extent on whether *their* rights are respected.

How do we gather in all this experience of women in different regions, make it more accessible, and enable many more women to be inspired by it? How do we ensure that the 21st Century is the century when women's voices are heard and our priorities win through?

One of the pre-occupations of our 21st century world is human security. And yet, human security can also be a divisive concept, especially when it is linked to what has been called the war on terrorism. Human insecurity, alas, was a daily reality before the attacks in the United States of 9/11 for the hundreds of millions who live in absolute poverty or in zones of conflict, and remains so. For those people, insecurity is not equated with where a terrorist might strike, but instead, where tomorrow's only meal will come from, how to acquire medicines for a dying child, how to avoid the criminal with a gun, how to manage the household as a ten year old AIDS orphan – the comprehensive insecurity of the powerless.

For women, gender is itself a risk factor threatening human security: the secret violence of household abuse, the private oppressions of lack of property or inheritance rights, the life long deprivations that go with lack of schooling, and the structural problem of political exclusion.

I want to take this opportunity to share with you how some women leaders want to create an open, empowering dialogue among women leaders worldwide under the broad framework of human security. We have established the Women Leaders Intercultural Forum (WLIF), a

five-year commitment to be launched in September 2006 which will bring together women leaders from different regions, initially the Muslim World, Europe and North and South America. It will be inter-generational, and link young women leaders with women in positions of power and influence.

The Women Leaders Intercultural Forum is a joint project of Columbia University, Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, Women's Learning Partnership, Council of Women World Leaders, Markkula Center for Ethics at Santa Clara University and the United Nations Population Fund. I have the honour to serve as a Co-Chair, and I would hope that some of you will join us in the first or subsequent meetings of the Forum.

The overarching goal of the Forum is to augment women's ability to increase the enjoyment of human security in their communities, their countries and the entire world. The specific issues considered at the 2006 conference—violence against women, economic empowerment of women, women and migration and the relationship of women and culture—were chosen because they are of central importance to women everywhere. The first WLIF conference will take place in New York at Columbia University on September 24-26, 2006, but will move to other continents in subsequent years.

It would be wonderful if a future meeting of WLIF could take place here in Abu Dhabi with the support of Zayed University. That would constitute one practical follow up to this conference. Seeing the enthusiasm of younger women participating here I want to emphasize the importance of the inter-generational dimension of WLIF. We are conscious that younger women have different reference points, different life experiences and educational opportunities to many women who have been part of a women's movement or struggle in their individual countries. Younger women in Europe and the United States tend not to share the feminist approaches of those who struggled earlier, but they do have issues relating to glass ceilings and life balance which they want to address. I am confident that younger women in the Arab region also have particular issues to highlight. This diversity of viewpoints and perspectives will enrich the discussions in the Women Leaders Intercultural Forum, as I am sure it will enrich this conference.

Let me conclude with challenging words of Aminata Diaw of DAWN, a network of women activists, researchers and policy makers from the South:

The transition to democracy is a narrative of the exclusion of women. What is needed is a new geography to give women space. This new space which women seek is one where there is negotiation between those with power and those without.

Let us, as women leaders, combine our voice and our vision to bring about that negotiation!

Thank you.

