**Hillary Rodham Clinton U.N.’s 4th World Conference on Women Plenary Session**

Thank you very much, [Gertrude Mongella](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gertrude_Mongella), for your dedicated work that has brought us to this point, distinguished delegates, and guests: I would like to thank the Secretary General for inviting me to be part of this important [United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women](https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/). This is truly a celebration, a celebration of the contributions women make in every aspect of life: in the home, on the job, in the community, as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, learners, workers, citizens, and leaders.

It is also a coming together, much the way women come together every day in every country. However different we may appear, there is far more that unites us than divides us. We share a common future, and we are here to find common ground so that we may help bring new dignity and respect to women and girls all over the world, and in so doing bring new strength and stability to families as well.

What we are learning around the world is that if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work and earn as full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish. And when families flourish, communities and nations do as well. That is why every woman, every man, every child, every family, and every nation on this planet does have a stake in the discussion that takes place here.

The great challenge of this conference is to give voice to women everywhere whose experiences go unnoticed, whose words go unheard. Women comprise more than half the world’s population, 70% of the world’s poor, and two-thirds of those who are not taught to read and write. We are the primary caretakers for most of the world’s children and elderly. Yet much of the work we do is not valued -- not by economists, not by historians, not by popular culture, not by government leaders.

Those of us who have the opportunity to be here have the responsibility to speak for those who could not. As an American, I want to speak for those women in my own country, women who are raising children on the minimum wage, women who can’t afford health care or child care, women whose lives are threatened by violence, including violence in their own homes.

Tragically, women are most often the ones whose human rights are violated. Even now, in the late 20th century, the rape of women continues to be used as an instrument of armed conflict. Women and children make up a large majority of the world’s refugees. And when women are excluded from the political process, they become even more vulnerable to abuse. I believe that now, on the eve of a new millennium, it is time to break the silence. It is time for us to say here in Beijing, and for the world to hear, that it is no longer acceptable to discuss women’s rights as separate from human rights.

It is a violation of human rights when babies are denied food, or drowned, or suffocated, or their spines broken, simply because they are born girls. It is a violation of human rights when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire, and burned to death because their marriage dowries are deemed too small. It is a violation of human rights when individual women are raped in their own communities and when thousands of women are subjected to rape as a tactic or prize of war. It is a violation of human rights when a leading cause of death worldwide among women ages 14 to 44 is the violence they are subjected to in their own homes by their own relatives. It is a violation of human rights when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation. It is a violation of human rights when women are denied the right to plan their own families, and that includes being forced to have abortions or being sterilized against their will.

If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights once and for all. Let us not forget that among those rights are the right to speak freely -- and the right to be heard.

In my country, we recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of [Women’s Suffrage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_suffrage). It took 150 years after the signing of our [Declaration of Independence](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/declarationofindependence.htm) for women to win the right to vote. It took 72 years of organized struggle, before that happened, on the part of many courageous women and men. It was one of America’s most divisive philosophical wars. But it was a bloodless war. Suffrage was achieved without a shot being fired.

As long as discrimination and inequities remain so commonplace everywhere in the world, as long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled, subjected to violence in and outside their homes -- the potential of the human family to create a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realized.

Let -- Let this conference be our -- and the world’s -- call to action. Let us heed that call so we can create a world in which every woman is treated with respect and dignity, every boy and girl is loved and cared for equally, and every family has the hope of a strong and stable future. That is the work before you. That is the work before all of us who have a vision of the world we want to see -- for our children and our grandchildren.

God's blessing on you, your work, and all who will benefit from it. Godspeed and thank you very much.