

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code:	2022/47/535
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Remarks at Vital Voices Conference

Belfast, Northern Ireland
September 2, 1998

Thank you. Thank you very much, Fiona, for that introduction and even more for adding your vital voice to this conference. I'm sure if you need a note to be excused from school there's about a thousand of us that would sign it. I want to thank Sue Tibballs and Rosemary Farrendon and Inez McCormick, not only for what they have said here this afternoon, but for their commitment and dedication to the issues that bring all of us here to Belfast.

Lord Mayor and Minister McFaul; Assembly Members; Mrs. Trimble; Ambassador Lader; Consul General Fort; and from Dublin, Minister Wallace and Ambassador Kennedy-Smith; and conference participants and distinguished guests.

It is a great honor and a personal delight for me to be back in Belfast. I feel embraced by, and greeted by the sounds of so many women's vital voices. From the reports I have received while I was in Russia, and the ones I just heard, this conference has already succeeded in bringing people together and enabling them to share ideas, and plot together to make the hoped-for peace a reality. Like all successes, this one, of course, is the product of many hands.

I want to thank everyone associated with the planning and implementation. I particularly want to thank Theresa Law who has moderated this afternoon's session for her hard work. I want to thank Secretary of State Mo Mowlam, who brought to this task vision, dedication, and, according to my sources at Hillsbourough Castle, her skills as a party host and dancer par excellence.

I also want to thank the new First Minister of the Assembly David Trimble and the Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon. Not only for sponsoring and speaking at this conference on Monday, but for their leadership in making sure that the seeds of peace, once planted, can grow. I was pleased to learn that the first reception the Ministers held together was at Stormont in honor of the women delegates from this conference. And to Lord Mayor, the Belfast City Council and the entire city of Belfast, thank you for being such wonderful hosts.

As I arrived here a few minutes ago, I thought about how the River Lagan, which once carried people away from these shores, now brings them back to find the rebirth of Belfast symbolized by this stunning Waterfront. I have been privileged in a small way to witness this re-birth starting with my husband's visit in November of 1995, and my return here last October speaking at the University of Ulster and speaking here to a conference of young people. I have seen in the faces of men and women and boys and girls, a new openness, a new commitment, a new awareness of the road that has been traveled and the road that lies ahead.

I know also that the songs of U2 and the other great musicians have filled the Waterfront in recent months, celebrating the transition that is occurring. But I also believe that from workshops to speeches to quiet conversations, nothing can compare to the powerful voices heard here over the last few days. Voices from every corner of Northern Ireland, the United States, England, Scotland, and Wales. From every tradition. From every sector of society. Every age. Women and men. All blending into a powerful

©DFA/2022/47/535

years ago, when I met Joyce at Ye Olde Lamplighter on Lower Ormeau Road, around a small wooden table we sipped tea and talked about what had brought these women together. How they realized that history and religion were keeping them apart even when they all wanted the same things: good jobs and good schools for their children. Streets you could walk down safely. Security and prosperity you could count on. A future you could believe in.

Hardly a radical agenda. But for this, Joyce was called a "trouble-maker." Well, she had another name for herself, and when she met me she proudly announced that she called herself a "Family Feminist" because saving families was the goal of all she did. I have met many family feminists around the world. In South Africa, Bosnia, Kazakhstan, China, Nicaragua, Brazil, Pakistan, and India. Places that are riven with strife, by disagreement, by conflict caused by racial, religious, and tribal differences. Yet, in the midst of even the worst of times, there are women like these who stand up and say: stop for a minute please, think about what is really important for us and our children.

I met such women at the Vital Voices Conference in Austria, inspired by Ambassador Swanee Hunt who is here with us today. I met them at the United Nations Conference in Beijing where I remembered clearly the banners that were created by women from every part of the world. They spread those banners across the Great Wall. Woven into them were the dreams of religions, and talked in different languages. But they spoke the same mother tongue--the language of freedom and hope.

And they sent a clear message. Economic progress depends on women's progress. Democratic progress depends on women's progress. Human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights. And this conference is part of an ongoing glowing initiative that is making these points over and over again and in the process of transforming women's lives and societies.

What a better time to recommit ourselves to these basic truths than in this year of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We're not talking about paying lip service to the rights written down on a piece of paper and filed away. Rather, we're talking about how we treat each other at home and work, at church and school and in political assemblies: Are we valued? Do we have the food, health care, education, shelter, the income we need to survive and flourish? Do we have the opportunities to help us reach our God-given potentials?

Now many of the women here in Northern Ireland and throughout the world with whom I have met know nothing of this Universal Declaration of Rights. But they know in their hearts and souls, that in spite of all they are told by culture and tradition, they are endowed with God-given rights, as surely as they were born into a human family. And the reason we want those rights is not merely to make a statement, or to be part of a political movement, but because we want to help create a better world, a world in which we can walk safely and we can live peacefully together with those who are like us and are unlike us, because we want our dignity and the dignity of all human beings respected.

In Beijing, I was particularly moved by the banner created by women of this island. On it, was a picture of a red-haired woman standing on top of the world. And since that day in 1995, it's amazing how far she has climbed in Northern Ireland alone.

Who would have thought the majority of women from both traditions would step forward and vote "yes" on a Peace Agreement? Who would have thought that when the first Assembly convenes, its seats will be filled with fourteen women? And who would have thought that the Agreement would demand a society that is truly inclusive? Not just all religions and political parties. But all women and men alike.

©DFA/2022/47/535

chorus calling for women to become full participants in a secure and democratic Northern Ireland. A Northern Ireland that people have hoped for, lived for, died for, and yes, finally voted for. Tomorrow, my husband will come here to the Waterfront to address your new Assembly, and to congratulate the citizens of Northern Ireland for this hard-won peace that is yours.

The last few months have shown what people here have always known; the road to peace will never be easy. But the world has also seen how no fires, bombs or terrorists will ever turn you back. When my husband and I go to Omagh tomorrow, we will pay tribute to those who were murdered by the enemies of peace. They were mostly women and children. They were Catholic and Protestant, Union and Nationalist, young and old. They were people simply living their lives, working at a drapery store, hanging out with friends, buying school uniforms for their children.

The terrorists targeted the people of Northern Ireland and in response it was the people, all the people, who bravely stood side by side to say: hatred and violence will no longer have a place here. We have chosen ballots, not bombs, democracy, not division. We have resolved to live in peace and we will never go back. We will only move forward. And as you do, please know that America will stand with you.

How appropriate it is that this conference takes place the first week of school--not only because it's a time for new friends and new beginnings. But also because, ultimately, our children are the reason we are here. For 30 years parents dropped their children off for school - tucked in their shorts, kissed them goodbye, and dreamed of a time they could play outside free from violence. Dreamed of a time when their children's opportunities and destinies would never again be limited by their place of worship or political party or by whether they're a boy or a girl. Today, there is real hope in this dream, once expressed through poetry and protest, it will finally be a reality for children in Northern Ireland.

None of this would have been possible if it were not for the courage and strength of generations of women. Though they may have worshiped separately on Sundays, seven days a week, they all said a silent prayer for their husbands to return safely home. Seven days a week, they lived in fear that the unspeakable would happen, they would be forced to bury their own child. And yet, seven days a week, they carried on with hope and prayer that the future would be brighter, free of troubles and heartbreak.

Wives. Mothers. Sisters. Daughters. Few were household names. But, having seen their lives and communities torn apart by violence, women came together as women have always done-around kitchen tables, at the market, in gatherings like this. It was women whose whispers of "enough" became a torrent of voices that could no longer be ignored. If we listen carefully, their voices still echo through this room and lift up ours today.

If we listen, we can hear the voices of women who withstood jeers and threats, prejudice and violence to make themselves heard in a political world once reserved primarily for men. We can hear the voices of women in Craigavon, who, instead of burrowing into their sorrow...used the power of the pen to heal by writing and sharing their poetry, short stories, essays, and plays. In one poem, Madge Steele writes about finding common ground:

Weave the threads of real friendship with the colors of your life, Use the pattern of Peace and leave out the strife, Thread the friends that are young along with the old, And you'll find on your loom a fabric of Gold.

If we listen, we can hear the voices of those who helped weave this fabric of gold, grassroots activists like the late Joyce McCarten, who literally wove communities together through the Troubles. Three

©DFA/2022/47/535

As my good friend, Secretary of State Albright likes to say, advancing the cause of women is not just the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do for any society. It was the smart thing for women to clear the path for reconciliation which brought us to this day. And it is the smart thing for women to play a central role in the reconstruction that will usher in a Northern Ireland that fulfills the promise of democracy, prosperity, and yes, peace, for all its citizens. Because as you well know, the Peace Agreement was the beginning, not the end.

What you have been doing here is thinking through in practical ways what must be done to fulfill the promise of peace. You know better than I, it will take far more discussions, conferences and reports. The hopes for peace will have to be translated into the hard work of practical action and political compromise, not only in the Assembly, but in every corner of society. So the real challenge of this conference starts as we leave. How will each of us work to fulfill the promise of peace? That, of course, will be up to the men and women of Northern Ireland to decide. But, based on what we know about the conditions that promote peace and prosperity, we, I think, can agree on basic goals: All people must have access to the tools of opportunity-good education, quality health care. Good jobs, loan, and credit. The kinds of opportunities that will give responsible people of whatever backgrounds the chance to move forward into the 21st century with confidence.

If we are to fulfill the promise of peace, we must translate into practical action what these goals mean. How do we, for example, have an education system that serves the needs of young people moving in a very different world, dominated by a global economy? How do we make available the kinds of credit that small business people need to build a thriving economy from the ground up in the most depressed area in Northern Ireland? How do we make sure that, loans and microcredit financing are available? That the businesses, the government and particularly the banks here will meet the needs of people anxious to demonstrate that they can build economic opportunities for themselves?

If the promise of peace is to be fulfilled, then all people must be safe from violence. And in particular, all women must be safe from violence, whether it happens in their homes or on the streets. Domestic violence which breathes the conditions of violence and aggressiveness setting one person against another must be seen for what it is: a crime, not a family matter. If the promise of peace is to be fulfilled, then all women and men must feel free to make their voices heard through the ballot box and the soap box. There are many goals and you have discussed them all here at this conference.

Surely, these goals require a guarantee of equal opportunity and democracy and that is what you have chosen. But, as our country has learned, democracy is hard work. It is a never-ending struggle. You never get it right, there is no perfect democracy, and its success ultimately depends not just on laws and institutions, but on attitudes and values. On getting along with people with whom you have profound differences. On the lessons we taught children as they are tucked into bed at night.

If you just think about women and girls, what are some of those lessons we want women and girls here and throughout the world to be learning? We teach our girls that we value them, not for what they look like, but for what they think, feel, do and dream. Will our businesses do more to help women get child care and other tools they need to successfully balance work and family so that no women ever have to make the choice between the job they need to put food on the table and the time they must give to the children they love? When a woman speaks up in the home, or the community, or the Assembly, will she be listened to as carefully and respectfully as if she were a man? And, as women, will we finally respect each other's choices? Will we admit that there is no model for women today that is one size fits all? That we can choose full time work or full-time motherhood and home-making, or like most women, doing

©DFA/2022/47/535

both at certain parts of our lives? And will we support the choices that each of us makes?

As you struggle both with issues unique in Northern Ireland and with ones experienced by women everywhere, I want you to know that the American government, the American people, and the larger worldwide community want to help you succeed.

What women have said over the last few days is they want the tools to lift up their voices and the lives of their families. And in this room are partners who want to help them do just that. We already heard from two, The Body Shop and the Ford Motor Company.

I want to applaud the more than $2 million in partnerships committed to the outcomes of this conference. They come from all sectors of society and they are dedicated to diverse areas like political leadership and media training, mentoring and most importantly economic development. This is just the beginning.

We leave here today with a commitment from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Northern Ireland Employment and Training Agency to improve women's access to jobs, child care, and training. We leave here with a commitment from the Institute of Directors to help women in middle management get the mentoring and training they need to succeed in European and world markets.

We leave here with commitments from corporations ranging from Xerox to MCI and from America Online to Marriott, which for example, will provide internships for young people in the tourism industry. And I have to say, as I flew from Moscow today, and was coming down to land over the landscape of Northern Ireland, I thought to myself, this is one of the most beautiful places of God's earth. A place that many people will want to come to visit and see for themselves. We leave here with commitments from the President and Secretary of State of the United States that our government will be vigorously engaged in turning the conference's partnership into results.

And we are encouraged to learn that our Northern Ireland partners are establishing a follow-up mechanism to carry this all forward.

As we leave here, let us pledge to each other that this is only the beginning. That, as the Peace Agreement is implemented, the voices we raised will never fade away. Instead, they will spread into every community, and as Inez reminded us they will be joined by many others who are not in this hall today.

Because, regardless of whether a man or a women voted yes or no to the peace agreement now in a democracy, every single citizen has a role to play in fulfilling the promise of peace. It will take businesses and non-governmental organizations. Churches of every tradition inspiring us to use our faith as a source of strength and unity. It will take men of all ages, because this struggle can never and will never be won without them. It will take all of you here, the women of Northern Ireland speaking out whenever injustices arise, to point out opportunities to face up to challenges and to speak for those who are still voiceless.

It will take young people like Fiona. Just a month ago, I had the opportunity to meet Fiona and other young women and men who had come to Washington with Project Children and the Children's Friendship Project. Some of them are here today. One, Vicky Moore, interned in my office and stood in the Forum elections for her constituency.

Another, Janette Rooney stayed in our nation's capital for six weeks, learning about leadership,

©DFA/2022/47/535

community service, and how to build the bridges of understanding between diverse communities. But on the day before Janette returned to her home in County Tyrone, the Omagh bomb went off. Several of her fellow students turned on CNN and saw their own friends being taken away to the hospital. One of Janette's best friends was killed.

When the director of the Children's Friendship Project called Janette at home a few days later to extend her condolences, Janette's mother mentioned how her daughter had just received an invitation to this Vital Voices Conference. How, during this time of suffering and unspeakable loss, this conference gave Janette something to look forward to. And how proud her mother was that her daughter was part of the solution...part of the new generation...part of the future of Northern Ireland. For that is what you are helping to create.

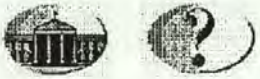
Tomorrow, I will visit along with the Lord Mayor and others, one of the beautiful green spaces in Belfast. It is the kind of place my mother or father would want their children to be able to play freely. There's a new partnership being formed between an American partnership named KaBOOM! and PlayBoard, a Northern Ireland organization devoted to creating safe environments for children to play. They hope to create such an environment somewhere in Belfast.

And what they build won't be some adult's vision of what sparks a child's imagination. The children themselves will design this space. They will be the architects of their own environment, in a way that is a metaphor for what's happening in Northern Ireland, isn't it? All of you are now the architects of your new environment. You are ultimately those who will determine whether the children of Northern Ireland can play like children should-without respect to religion or politics, without stereotyping or name calling, without fear or violence. That is for me the ultimate dream I see in my mind's eye, as I land here in your airport, as I travel the streets, as I look into the faces of the people standing on the curbs waving at my car. I believe that will happen, and when it does we will think back to this conference and we will know that women's voices played a vital role in fulfilling this promise of peace for all citizen's of Northern Ireland-for men and women, boys and girls.

May God bless you in this important work and the future you build together.

Thank you very much





To comment on this service,
send feedback to the Web Development Team.

Read our Privacy Policy

©DFA/2022/47/535