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Speech

Women's Rights and International Dialogue*

Senator Maria de los Angeles Moreno**

I. Introduction

The topic of women's rights can be addressed from various angles: juridical and legislative, economic, social or political. For this reason, I intend to guide today's reflection toward an integral vision. The Beijing Declaration arising from the Fourth World Conference on Women postulates that the human rights of women form an integral, indivisible and inalienable part of all human rights and fundamental liberties. To this end, it points out that there is a commitment to "guaranteeing all human rights and basic liberties for all women and girls, and taking effective measures against violations of these rights and liberties." Less than three years away

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from the twenty-first century, it is a fact that women's rights are not always recognized, are infrequently discussed, and are almost never accepted as being on a par with those of men. This should give rise to deep reflection.

In this context, this conference which brings us together to discuss women's rights is relevant. I thank the authorities of the Pennsylvania State University for their kind invitation to take part in this discussion and I am grateful to you for your kindness. I also appreciate the coordination network set up by the Hidalgo Institute of Public Administration for holding this event.

II. Rights to What and Freedom for What?

It is fascinating to talk about rights and freedoms, and one might do so interminably. Hence, I here aim only at stating and giving examples of some aspects which are of interest.

It would appear evident, but is not the case, that women are entitled to be considered and treated as complete human beings with intelligence, sensitivity, capability for autonomous choice and decision making, creative potential, and a productive rather than simply reproductive capacity. By the same token, they have a right to food, dignified employment, health, and the use of natural resources and of the means of production. Clearly they have the right to equality before the law and to protection against all manner of violence, as well as to obtaining support in order to eliminate the social gender discrimination from which they suffer merely by dint of being women. Likewise, women have, or should have, the right to decide their own destiny, as well as to choose the kind of society in which they wish to live and to take part in building it.

Over recent decades the position of women in the world has advanced in some essential aspects. However, such progress has not been homogeneous in all countries and there remain serious inequalities between men and women. In many parts of the world the latter are still considered objects of, and not subjects for, development.

Up to the present it is a statistical and practically substantiated fact that, above all in developing countries where large sections of the population live in precarious conditions, the burden of poverty falls more heavily on the world of women; they have less chance of entering productive activities of a satisfying nature and have a relatively scarce chance of being meaningfully active in social and political matters.

Another regrettable reality is that the mere fact of being a woman implies various degrees of discrimination in matters essential to life. The following are some examples taken from a UNICEF report:

- * Of the 100 million children worldwide who do not attend school between the ages of 6 and 11, 70% are girls.
- * Two thirds of the one billion illiterate adults in the world are women.
- * In Mexico, despite advances in the provision of education to women, in 1990 around 15% of the country's female population of fifteen or more years of age was still illiterate.
- * In South Asia, the notably lower rates of survival for girls are due to the abandonment to which they are subject. In the countries of this region it is calculated that a million girls die every year simply because they belong to the female gender.
- * In many cultures taboos regarding food limit what girls and women may eat. Consequently they do not receive the proteins and minerals which they require to survive.
- * Though child labor should not exist, girls everywhere receive lower pay than boys. With only a few exceptions, worldwide men hold better jobs and receive better wages.
- * If housework was included in figures for national income, the world's gross national product would increase by between 20% and 30%.

In the face of this evidence, it seems clear that, while women's rights may form a part of written legislation, they are not fulfilled and reality is very far from theory.

With regard to women's liberties, in many parts of the world women are not permitted to preserve their own physical integrity, to develop social relationships, to choose how they will be brought up, which activities they will engage in or what they will wear, much less to decide on the composition of their families. Even in the most economically advanced countries, if not in law then in practice, the possibility of women playing a full and equal part in social decision-making and having access to power is lower.

III. The Right to an Equitable Share in the Economy and in Society.

Over recent decades, the level of women's participation in the work force has tended to increase in most parts of the world, to the extent that reference is made to the "feminization" of the work and

job force. In 1994, around 45% of women between 15 and 64 years of age were economically active. Traditionally, the proportion of economically active women has been lower than that of men; however, in various regions of the world their level of activity has increased while that of men has diminished slightly. In the OECD countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), from 1983 to 1992, the average annual growth in the number of economically active women was 2.1%, more than double that of men, which was 0.8%.

In developing countries, according to International Labor Organization (ILO) figures concerning economically active population, the share of women in the work force was 44% in 1994, and this without taking into account the fact that many women work in the rural sector or in the informal urban sector, areas which are not reflected in the figures. ILO studies show that, based on a more ample definition of "economic activity" which includes the informal sector, levels of female activity increase, for example, from 13% to 88% in India and from 11% to 63% in Bangladesh.

In this regard, Latin America is among the regions with the lowest rates of women in the labor force, with around 30% for the age group between 15 and 64. Nevertheless, women's participation is on the rise and, in some countries and for certain age groups, may have reached the same level as men's.

It is worth pointing out that the Arab countries show the lowest levels of active female participation. The processes of economic restructuring, internationalization and technological change affect men and women differently. For the latter, while opportunities for employment have broadened, the quality of jobs offered has deteriorated: their participation in the informal sector has increased and a great many of their families are growing ever poorer. At present, a sharp rise is occurring in the number of households headed by women. This has occurred mainly in developing countries and, generally, the households in question are poorer than those headed by men or jointly run.

In almost all countries, the search for greater productivity and economic yield imposed by competition has brought with it increasing employment of women, especially as this may constitute a more flexible and cheaper work force, and a resultant limitation in the creation of stable, full-time jobs. At the same time, technological progress has reduced the number of jobs which can be done by barely qualified workers, a category where women are predominant. Some of these jobs traditionally done by women are becoming obsolete, including, for example, office work, industrial

assembly and manual agricultural labor. This has favored the development of other options, such as partial working days and seasonal, sub-contracted, or home-based work. This type of employment which might, in theory, be adapted to meet the needs of working mothers, is unfortunately offered on bad contractual terms and with low benefit levels.

The costs of greater integration of women in the labor market cannot be attributed solely and exclusively to the above-mentioned aspects of economic transformation. Social and cultural prejudices have been determining factors in women's continued carrying of the double burden of family and professional obligations, and in inhibiting their educational and personal development.

The persistence of a division of labor based on gender and its concomitant stereotypes has led to a segregation in labor which continues to be the most important factor in the inequality of pay between men and women. In spite of this, nowadays we can no longer assume that women entering the labor market are less qualified than men. Nevertheless, young women continue to seek out traditional female areas of study and professional activity, thus limiting the possibilities of acquiring the scientific and technical aptitudes needed in order to satisfy the new demands of the labor market.

Hence, on one hand, the recent transformations in the world economy have brought about new forms of labor organization and a growth of informal sectors, increasing the number of women operating outside the scope of labor law; on the other hand, social prejudices and cultural inertia have helped ensure that women remain a minority in managerial and decision-making posts, finding their work opportunities limited to a narrow domain dubbed "female jobs," with salaries lower than those of men.

In Mexico, women's participation in economic activities has increased steadily over the last 25 years. In 1970, of every 100 women aged 12 or over, only 17 carried out activities considered to be of an economic nature. Twenty five years later, 35 of every 100 women of working age were to be found in the job market. This despite the fact that statistics leave out many of the activities carried out by women. Between 1970 and 1990, the rate at which women entered the labor market was almost double that for men (3.6% yearly for men, against 6.2 % for women).

Previously, in Mexico women were mainly housewives and their role as workers took second place. However, in recent years, this situation has changed; now, the majority of women play both roles equally! This is illustrated by the fact that 60% of economic-

ally active women have children and 85% of these women both work and carry out household tasks. However, inequality in pay persists and the quality of work offered to women has deteriorated.

Women continue to be concentrated in a reduced spectrum of occupations and, within this, in lower-level posts. They mainly work in personal and domestic jobs and in commerce. Their presence has also increased in those sectors characterized by flexible organization of the working process, within both industry and agriculture. This implies unstable and unsafe working conditions, substitution of formal work by part-time work, the spread of labor into the home, piecemeal payment, and an absence of social benefits. Senior and decision-making jobs which are more highly paid, along with jobs linked to science and technology which present better employment opportunities, continue to be controlled by men. Even where women are adequately qualified and possess the necessary qualities, the reality of the labor market rarely permits them entry into such jobs.

With regard to pay, inequality between the sexes persists. For example, the average income for male professionals working full time is 34% higher than that of professional women working under the same conditions and, within the group of women who work in the largely female-dominated area of sales and trading, the difference rises to 74% in favor of men.

IV. Democracy and Women's Participation in Politics.

The situation of women and their share in the economy and in society's well-being is full of contrasts. It cannot be denied that advances have taken place, but one cannot assert that progress has been steady and much less that it has been equitable. There remain serious inequalities between men and women and living and working conditions for the latter vary a great deal according to the degree of a country's development and to the prejudices and cultural obstacles which block the presence of women in leading areas of social activity.

Hence, it is indispensable that women have a determining influence on the conceptualization and application of new developmental aims and strategies. Female decisiveness should bring about in-depth attitude changes and transform an authoritarian and paternalistic culture into a democratic one. The entry of women, with full rights, into public life and into the exercise of power must be part of the makeup of a better society in the next century, and

must give new content in our development towards equity and peace.

It is unquestionable that a female presence in decision-making, at all levels and in all cases, is not only a matter of basic justice, but also a necessary condition for the consolidation of democracy and the definition of priorities which address and respond to basic social demands and interests. Greater women's participation must mean that the exercise of politics and the democratic use of power will serve to raise developmental levels and to positively transform the quality of life for everybody. The participation of women, on equal terms with men, should give rise to a new culture which modifies and eradicates ancestrally-rooted discriminatory patterns, a new culture that offers women the full opportunity to take part in designing the society which we desire, and also in the outline of their own life and of the full enjoyment of the fruits of collective efforts.

Nonetheless, these objectives still seem distant. In fact, a recent study published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union makes it clear that there is a significant difference with regard to the political participation of the two sexes. The report asserts that "with the exception of the Nordic countries, all other nations carry on a political process which excludes almost half of their human resources and talents. Thus, democracy suffers, and development is hindered."

In this respect, the report offers some illustrative data:

- * The scarcity of women in political party managerial posts is evident. At least one woman is seen to be present in management bodies in 90% of countries and in 40% of the political parties examined, but, with regard to executive functions of greater impact, there is a notable decrease in frequency.
- * The post of Party Secretary, not necessarily linked to that of Party Head, is found to be held by women in one out of every three countries, and in one out of every ten parties. Spokeswomen are found in 24% of countries and in 8% of parties, and female heads of parliamentary groups in 27% of countries and 7% of parties. The level of women's presence in presidential and vice-presidential posts turned out to be very similar.
- * Throughout the world, women are a minority, and generally a weak one, in national parliaments. In no country has that equal, unique degree of representational parity been reached which might reflect the makeup of the populations of almost all the countries of the world. The

Nordic nations are the only ones with a high proportion (36.4%) of women in their parliaments.

- * Between 1945 and 1997, the proportion of female parliamentarians has gone from 3.0% to 12.0% in the case of deputies, and from 2.2% to 9.8% in the case of senators.
- * The data for 53 national parliaments, corresponding to countries at varying levels of development, show that only 14.3% of the members of managing bodies are women. This may be seen as a generalized tendency toward scant representation of women in responsibility-bearing party echelons.
- * In 51 years of world parliamentary history, only 38 of the 186 States with legislative institutions have made a woman a parliamentary president or president of either parliamentary chamber at some time in their history. In January 1997, 7.1% of all such presidents were women.

The findings of the Inter-Parliamentary Union lead to the conclusion that there is "a grave democratic deficit and an ample wastage of human resources," due to the inequitable levels of female participation in politics. The Union proposes that a new social pact be established, "not to promote one gender to the detriment of the other," but to achieve well-being for all. This new contract has two conceptual dimensions: "the concept of parity which reflects the fact that members of the two sexes are different but equal, and the concept of cooperation which shows that a creative working relationship can exist between men and women, in order to effectively face the community's problems."

Personally, I am convinced that the effective participation of women, fully conscious and increasingly prepared for the task they will face, alongside men will bring about a real transformation of economic and social structures which, in turn, will give the former full and equitable access to the means and fruits of production.

Let me give some concrete details with regard to my own country, Mexico. A few data will suffice to show the inequalities in practice, with regard to the opportunities for women to take an active part in public life: from 1953 to the present, there have been 180 male secretaries of state and only six female ones. Women hold less than 10% of governmental jobs concerning procurement of justice, and less than 5% of managerial posts on state, municipal and precinct executive bodies. Though women make up more than half the electorate, in the recently constituted 57th Legislature, only 16.7% of congressional deputies and senators are women. In state Congresses, of 1,052 legislators, 118, a mere 11.2%, are women.

Of the country's three parties receiving the most votes, female participation in the various decision-making posts fluctuates between 16% and 24%. A similar inequality regarding opportunities for women can be seen in different spheres of our national life.

V. Some Criteria and Proposals Regarding Policy and Legislation in Favor of Women.

At the local, national, regional and international levels, there are structural and ideological barriers which discriminate against women's capabilities and aptitudes when it comes to policy-formulation and decision-making. Today more than ever, it is important that, in research, as well as in the generating and processing of information, gender criteria be considered in order to foster a better understanding of reality, and to permit the design and implementation of policies which explicitly benefit women. Such policies should take women's perspectives and initiatives into account and favor their access to decision-making and to playing a part in the drawing up of collective agreements.

Various international mechanisms, such as the International Agreement on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Commission on the Legal and Social Status of Women, and the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, testify to world interest in the procurement of legal equality between men and women. One of their recommendations regards working together with members of legislative bodies in order to introduce a gender perspective into all legislation and policies.

In the Inter-parliamentary Union Conference entitled "Towards an association between men and women in politics," which was held in February of this year, it was considered that an especially strong movement could be set up "if women parliamentarians join forces, so that policy-making, in all areas, takes women's point of view into account." In July of this year, the "International Conference on Government, Sustainable Development and Equity" took place at the United Nations. This conference ratified the necessary cooperation and gender parity between men and women legislators, in carrying out policies linked to women.

In the first instance, it would seem necessary that efforts be centered around the design and application of a national policy on equal opportunity to productive and well-paid employment. It would also be convenient to take up, again, the proposal of the

International Labor Organization regarding the need to have a supporting legislative framework, including the ratification and application of pertinent work norms. Likewise, this framework should expand the definition of the rights of female workers themselves, increase the protection of women involved in home-based labor who have family responsibilities and of those involved in part-time work, and establish adequate child-help services.

There is an urgent need to undertake research and study in order to come up with new forms of social protection for women operating outside formal employment systems. Active labor policies must be worked out, sensitive to the problems of inequality between the sexes, as well as training policies which address diversification and greater flexibility regarding qualifications, in relation to the new opportunities in the labor market.

It would seem convenient that women's organizations be strengthened and multiplied, in order to promote social awareness of information on rights, forms of protection, access to productive resources, community protection programs, and participation in decisions having to do with employment and welfare policies.

In the area of cultural attitudes and guidelines, it is necessary to educate and train men and women, to make them aware of the relevance of achieving gender equality as part of enhanced development. In this process, it is necessary to foster the sharing of family responsibilities and the adoption of measures which allow women's work activities to be reconciled with their reproductive function.

Recently, in Mexico, repeated reference has been made to the need to legislate, more explicitly, on the right to non-discrimination as established in Article 4 of our Constitution, to reform the Civil Code in order to achieve more precise regulation of family rights and responsibilities, to analyze possible reforms to the laws governing various social security and mother/child-care institutions, to review regulatory mechanisms and instances of labor law, so that no woman is discriminated against at work by reason of her reproductive function, and to legislate against violence within the family.

Initiatives such as these, stemming from civil organizations, which propose ample fields of cooperation that may be reached by common accord of women from different parties, have already borne important fruits in past years. Without doubt, the mobilization of women, in social groupings, civil organizations and political groups, has provided important support to women legislators and, in many cases, has spurred on important proposals and advances in

legislation, in practice and in the evaluation of measures in favor of women. Nevertheless, much remains to be done. There are immediate and concrete challenges to be faced. For all of these reasons, greater organization, preparation and gender consciousness are necessary, both in women and in men.

It is of the utmost importance that we bring about fuller women's participation in defining public policies, in the formulation of legislative measures and in making governmental decisions. Today more than ever, the political action of women is relevant, in order to bring about a true democratic advancement which will not only tend to perfect the judicial and electoral systems, but will also lead to the creation of jobs and to an equitable distribution of income; it should also be capable of offering sufficient opportunities with regard to education, health and diet, and, all said, of guaranteeing social welfare and justice for all.

I am convinced that the presence and effective action of women in public life, on equal terms, will significantly help to put on course those transformations needed to build a better society for new generations of boys and girls, in order to ensure a future characterized by well-being for everybody.

