

Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas
Annual Conference for International Women's Day
Bern, Switzerland
March 8, 2013
Keynote address by Ambassador Betty King

Greetings. Thank you for that kind introduction.

It is a pleasure and an honor to be asked to address you today about the role of women in diplomacy on International Women's Day. I understand you were briefed about the work of the U.S. Mission in Geneva earlier this week by the women's coordinators from USAID, Political Affairs, Economic Affairs, and Humanitarian Affairs – all female diplomats serving their country and promoting issues that are critical to women around the world.

As some of you know, this is my second diplomatic post. I feel quite privileged to serve my country as the Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, and previously under President Clinton as the U.S. Ambassador to the Economic and Social Council. In these positions, I've been fortunate to act as an

advocate for women on a wide range of issues from the development of the Millennium Development Goals in my tenure at the U.S. Mission to the UN New York, to my current capacity, working on improvements in women's health, on entrepreneurship opportunities for women to develop livelihoods, and sheltering and protecting women and children refugees in situations of conflict across the globe.

I am fortunate to be serving at the UN in Geneva at a time when there are 42 female permanent representatives to that international body. This is the highest number of female ambassadors at any point in the history of the United Nations. Naturally we took advantage of this unique opportunity to create something called the Lipstick Club. The very name of this club reflects the confidence that women have in their ability to do serious work – diplomacy in our case – while emphasizing our femininity. Needless to say, among the male ambassadors there is endless fascination about what exactly goes on in the Lipstick Club.

In a more serious vein, last week club members from Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Qatar, Romania, the UK, the U.S. and the EU co-sponsored an event called the Power of Empowered Women. The highpoint of this event was a conversation among a group of inspiring women leaders who have overcome obstacles in their own careers and lives to realize full gender equality. They are now speaking out about their own experiences in the hope that they would be of benefit to others. I have brought you a short tape of some vignettes of that event. In that tape you will hear the voices of women from around the world proclaiming that women don't create wars, but are the major victims of war, most often because they are victims of rape, or because they have become sole providers for their families. You will also hear reminders from these women that the rights we now enjoy in terms of equal representation are not a gift from our presidents or prime ministers or governors, they are instead a right. Thus they rightly argue that if we represent half of the population, we should enjoy half of the benefits in terms of jobs, income, status, etc.

Through events like these, we aim to give women a voice and empower them to take on leadership roles, rather than advocating for women's rights in the abstract.

During her tenure as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made empowering women and girls a cornerstone of our foreign policy – appointing the first ambassador at large for women’s issues and integrating women’s issues as key elements in our Global Health Initiative and our Global Food Security Initiative. Secretary Clinton remarked that “women’s equality is not just a moral issue, it’s not just a humanitarian issue, it is not just a fairness issue; it is a security issue. It is a prosperity issue and it is a peace issue” explaining why we need to integrate women’s issues into discussions at the highest levels everywhere in the world. While Secretary Clinton and President Obama had an obvious personal commitment to empowerment of women and girls, they also recognized that such empowerment is in the vital interest of the United States and indeed the world.

On January 20, President Obama signed a Presidential Memorandum to guarantee that advancing the rights of women and girls will remain central to U.S. diplomacy and development around the world, and that these efforts will continue to attract high-level and high-quality leadership in the U.S. Government. The memo ensures that an Ambassador-at-large reporting directly to Secretary of State John Kerry heads the State Department office of Global Women's Issues, and appoints a senior coordinator for gender equality and women's empowerment at USAID -- a powerful and enduring legacy to Secretary Clinton.

We have seen the results of our collective efforts in communities around the world: if women work, they drive economic growth across all sectors. Send a girl to school, even just for one year, and her income dramatically increases for life, and her children are more likely to survive, and her family more likely to be healthier for years to come. Give women equal rights, and entire nations are more stable and secure. Deny women equal rights, and the instability of nations is almost

certain. The subjugation of women is, therefore, a threat to the common security of our world and to the national security of our country. That is why across all of our work, from our initiatives on food security and climate change and global health to our efforts on peace and security, we have made this a primary focus.

Much of my time and energy in Geneva is devoted to working with the global health organizations including the World Health Organization, UNAIDS, Gavi Alliance for vaccines, and the Global Fund, to focus on women's health issues. In 2010, the Obama administration launched the Global Health Initiative, which commits the United States Government to spending \$63 billion over six years to improve global health by investing in efforts to reduce maternal and child mortality, prevent millions of unintended pregnancies, and avert millions of new HIV infections, among other goals. This initiative employs a new approach to fighting disease and promoting health. It will address interrelated health challenges together, for example, by integrating family planning, maternal health

services, and HIV/AIDS screening and treatment, so that women receiving reproductive care will also receive HIV counseling, and will be referred to an HIV clinic if they need one.

Maternal and child health are particularly important indicators of broader progress. We've learned more about the conditions that accompany political unrest. It turns out that one of the most persistent predictors for political upheaval is the rate of infant mortality. In places where the rate of infant mortality is high, the quality of life is low because investment in and access to healthcare are often out of reach. And that breeds the kind of frustration, hopelessness, and anger that we've seen in conflict zones. We also know that child mortality is closely connected with maternal mortality. When a mother dies, her children are at much greater risk of dying as well. Just last year, USAID launched the 5th Birthday Campaign on Facebook and Twitter, getting politicians and world leaders to upload photos of themselves on their 5th birthday, which raised awareness of child mortality and the linkages to maternal health.

Simple solutions also can have a dramatic impact on the lives of women and girls. Last year the U.S. Mission in Geneva sponsored the “Women, Water and Wells” exhibit for World Water Day. The photographic exhibit demonstrated how the introduction of wells and clean water into villages and communities can dramatically change the lives of women. When agencies work with local communities, women are given the opportunity to manage domestic and commercial water resources and projects. When women are no longer compelled to spend hours hauling water – women and girls attend school in greater numbers, and can focus their energy on family income generation activities. Earning means that women often gain more of a voice in family matters, along with which comes respect and dignity. Also, women need to have decision making ability over decisions on income in the community.

This exhibit was part of our cultural program organized by the Mission’s Public Affairs Office. Such activities, on the soft

side of diplomacy, have a special impact demonstrating through the visual arts the U.S. government's commitment to a particular issue. Coming up later this year, we will host a quilt exhibit at the United Nations – it will be the third such exhibit. This one will focus on “Light, Hope, and Opportunity,” three ideals that we could use a bit more of at the United Nations. We also look forward to an exhibit in coordination with the International Trade Centre's Ethical Fashion Initiative, which is supported by USAID. The Ethical Fashion Initiative aims to integrate micro-enterprise textiles from developing countries such as Ghana and Haiti into global supply chains. It simply offers women opportunities that were previously out of reach and allows them to reap more of the profits on their products by eliminating many of the middlemen. This exhibit will be on display at the World Trade Organization during the Fourth Global Review Conference – as a visual reminder to trade ministers from around the world of the power of micro-enterprise and trade as a means of lifting people out of poverty.

I understand that in the FAWCO Conference you have an auction to raise funds for a worthy project. The U.S. Mission was thrilled to offer you one of the quilts donated by Dorothy Stockwell from our first quilt exhibit at the United Nations for this auction. Your organizations sponsor causes that advance women's rights and empower women economically. And with each act of kindness and generosity by you and the American Women's Clubs you represent, you reflect the best face of America overseas and are diplomats in a fashion.

I thank you again for allowing me to reflect on what it means to advocate for women as an American diplomat. By recounting many of the actions we have undertaken in the last few years, it gives me a chance to contemplate the impact of these initiatives on empowering the lives of women and girls and advocating for their human rights as well as their health and economic well-being.

If we all followed the mantra of the Beijing Conference to leave the ladder standing after we have climbed it, we would all make significant contributions to the improvement of the lives of women across the world.

Thank you.