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Madeleine Albright

White House Address Commemorating International Women's Day



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Thank you very much....Thank you....Breaking the glass ceiling.

Mr. President, and Madam First Lady -- dear Michelle -- distinguished guests:

International Women's Day reminds us of a lesson that we have long since learned, but have not yet sufficiently put into practice. The lesson is grounded in principle, but also in experience. The principal is that the basic rights and dignity of women and girls should be accorded the same respect as that given to men and boys -- a principal endorsed over and over again by global conferences and covenants.

Our experience is that when women have the power to make our own choices, we will benefit because the chains of poverty can be broken, families grow stronger, environmental awareness deepens, and socially constructive values are more likely to be handed down to the young. This experience has been validated in the life of communities on every continent, and yet women remain in many parts of the globe an undervalued and underutilized human resource, as the President has just said.

This is not to say that women have trouble finding work. Often they do -- the vast majority of the work -- but don't own land, aren't taught to read, can't obtain credit, and don't get paid. Women have made great progress in obtaining legal recognition of their rights, but frequently, even when the laws on the books are just, the reality in homes and villages is not.



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Appalling abuses are still being committed against women. And these include: domestic violence, dowry murders, coerced abortions, honored crimes, and the killing of infants simply because their born female.

Some say, all this is cultural and there's nothing anybody can do about it.

I say it's criminal and we each have an obligation to stop it.

I have been in public life for more than three decades and have attended many events related to international women's rights. And in each, uplifting goals were announced.

But our purpose today and tomorrow and throughout this century is not to articulate more promises but to achieve real breakthroughs by caring about each other, by lifting each other up, and by building an action network that stretches across every border of nation, race, background, and creed.

To illustrate, I'd like to offer a poem, written by the granddaughter of a community organizer from America's Midwest. Her name is Marge Piercy and the poem begins with questions:

*What can they do to you?
Whatever they want.
They can set you up,
They can bust you,
They can break your fingers,
They can burn your brain with electricity,
They can take your child.
They can do anything and you can't stop them from doing.*

*How can you stop them?
Alone, you can fight,
You can refuse,
You can take what revenge you can,
But they roll over you.*

*But two people fighting back to back can cut through a mob.
Two people can keep each other sane; can give support, conviction, love, hope.*

Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge.

With four you can play bridge and start an organization.

*With six you can rent a whole house,
Eat pie for dinner with no seconds,
And hold a fund raising party.*



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A dozen make a demonstration.

A hundred fill a hall.

A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter.

Ten thousand, power and your own paper.

A hundred thousand, your own media.

Ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time.

*It starts when you care to act,
It starts when you do it
again after they said no,
And it starts when you say
"We" and know whom you mean,
And each day you mean one more.*

As these words remind us, progress in women's rights occurs step by step, and each victory becomes a platform upon which the next may be built.

Our shared task is to keep building until we've raised enough platforms high enough to transform the very horizons of the earth. And in that quest we invite everyone to help us and caution each that they cannot stop us.

Thank you very, very much.