

# Keynote Address

By

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All Protocols Observed:

Good evening fellow women leaders and other distinguished guests.

I am humbled to have been invited me to give this keynote address in this sterling gathering of women leaders in several fields – government, the private sector, civil society.

Former Prime Minister of Israel Golda Meir was speaking truth to power when she said, “We women are not better than our men, but we are too good for our own countries and the world to do without our active participation in the struggle for peace and development.” Women are on a major crusade, and this crusade is not about proving ourselves to the masculinist structures of power. It is really about empowerment, collaboration, and partnership. We represent half of the population of the entire globe, and in some countries, more than that. Indeed, our perspectives, experiences, contributions, and insights are too vital not to be the driving force behind sustainable development. We are too good not to insert ourselves in the decision making processes that will develop our villages, communities, cities, towns, municipalities, nations, and the entire globe.

What women bring to a sustainable development agenda is fortitude, a level of conscientiousness, and the commitment to see things through. I would even argue that it was probably a woman who insisted that “sustainable” become a part of the development lexicon, demonstrating the kind of foresight that sees beyond the here and now, into a future world that will effect generations to come. We are equipped to not only run micro-credit firms such that our sisters all over the world can have access to the necessary capital to sustain homes, but in many of our countries we are also producers of our own food, down to the very grains that feed entire villages and towns. We are already a part of the development trajectory, though we lack the much deserved recognition.

The United Nations Development Programme has defined sustainable development as development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably, that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it and that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It is development that gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities and providing for their participation in decisions that affect their lives. Unfortunately, the current patterns of economic development and globalization are increasing the gap between rich and poor. The gender divide is an equally pervasive barrier to change, positioning women at a disadvantage continuing what is known as the feminization of poverty.

Part of the transition toward a more sustainable way of life involves the redistribution of resources. However, the continuing flow of resources away from women and towards men only perpetuates an enduring imbalance. We are all aware of the glaring realities in our respective countries. From the beginning of their lives, female children are deprived of food, education, and attention while the available resources are used on their brothers. The education and sometimes the lives of female children are seen as less valuable than those of their male counterparts and sets a pattern that many women abide by their entire lives, affecting their abilities to make decisions at the village level, community level, national level, and global level.

There has been a tidal wave of revolutionary change, and I am a testament of that. So are you. Women nowadays are not only breaking through the glass ceiling, we are shattering it and erecting new structures. We are pushing the envelope, and sliding through boundaries. Many of us stand as recipients of the torch that our predecessors passed on. This new all-encompassing power that women are exhibiting brings about both potential and challenges.

Let me begin with the germinating seeds of progress. Generally speaking, there have been a number of improvements to women's lives in the past twenty years. For example, female life expectancy is increasing; more girls are going to school; more women are in the paid workforce; and, many countries have introduced laws to protect women's rights. Liberia just last year introduced the country's first ever rape law, and is now prosecuting perpetrators of sexual violence against women. This development seems a bit outdated, but it was a necessary measure given the high incidence of sexual violence enacted against women during our civil war.

The potential is quite astounding when you think about what our predecessors had to fight for in the trenches. In communities around the world, women are organizing and are often leading the change towards more sustainable ways of living. The projects women are organizing range from tree planting in Kenya to housing projects in El Salvador to campaigns against the chlorine bleaching of paper products in Canada. Women in Uganda are leading the peace talks between rebel factions in the North and the government. The state of women in politics is evolving, the progress astounding, especially with the election of almost nearly seven female heads of state in the past five years.

Professionally, women are soaring to new heights. Though young women are constantly being reminded of their limitations and restrictions, some are overcoming these barriers by becoming doctors, mothers, teachers, laborers, wives and farmers. Women of all ages are important contributors to society and they are struggling to realize their dreams in areas

where they have been excluded. These are just some examples of women who are on the frontlines and behind the scenes in all sectors. But we cannot rest on these achievements as the benchmarks of our success.

The challenges are many, and statistics quite sobering. Women are put in a position that makes them one of the most vulnerable sectors of society. Statistics show that women, along with children, are the most impoverished sector of society. Of the world's 1.3 billion poor people, it is estimated that 70 percent of them are women. They are often the first stricken by disease and the last to receive treatment. There are many horror stories about women and development-from population programs that provide women with unsafe contraceptives to community planning that ignores their contributions and interests. Women earn about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the living wage that men earn, though rural women produce 55% of food grown in developing countries. In most countries, women work more than twice the amount of unpaid time men do. The value of women's unpaid housework and community work is estimated at over \$11 trillion dollars. Although these inequalities remain, women political power is growing. In 2006, women held 17% of parliamentary seats worldwide up from 10% three years ago. In twenty countries, women hold more than 30% of these seats.

This is why women's leadership for sustainable development is so vital. Beyond our roles in politics or academia, we are also caregivers, nurturers, and cultural transmitters. That is a powerful force. And our power as a united front is greater than the disparate achievements sprinkled all over the globe. Women should be integrally involved in decision making and policy formulation as it relates to sustainable development initiatives because we bring an insight that is missing from the heavily masculine corridors of power. And this leadership goes beyond board rooms, ministerial meetings or cabinet deliberations. It has to seep into the very social apparatus, right down to the family level. This is where transforming attitudes about gender roles begin, in the nucleus of the family.

What is expected of women in sustainable development, you ask?

Transformative leadership is women's leadership. It can be compared to the engine that drives sustainable development. It fuels innovation. Some of us may have official titles that brand us as "leaders," but in actuality we are all called to push the agenda of human progress and sustainable development. Women's leadership for sustainable development is best facilitated when there is compromise, sacrifice, and endurance on the part of those chosen to lead. The same level of compromise, sacrifice and endurance is required of those who follow, as well. In this respect, we are all called to be leaders in developing our nations in all sectors, in all contexts, in all manners. Without women driving that leadership agenda, the scale will be tipped and unbalanced.

The Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development urges governments all over the world to undertake a number of activities to transform the nature of women's active participation in development. Their recommendations are sound and progressive. They encourage governments to review policies and establish plans to increase the proportion of women involved in all sustainable development activities; increase the enrolment and the educational standards of females; institute plans to lessen the heavy workload of women and girl children at home and outside through the provision of more and affordable kindergartens; support and strengthen equal employment opportunities and equitable remuneration; and introduce measures to enhance the

economic opportunities of women. We, too, should be pushing these initiatives wherever we find ourselves, and mentoring others along the way.

A nation is like a human chain and sustainable development the nuts and bolts that hold that chain together. Without women, the chain would disintegrate. I urge you all to go back to your respective nations and push sustainable development and women's leadership to that end a little harder, so that women for generations to come will rise above cultural norms and practices that freeze us in a time warp.

What women bring to development is blood, sweat, and tears. Let's remind others of their obligation to transform this world in the here and now for a more sustainable future. We owe it to ourselves; we owe it to each other.

Thank you.