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FIRST LADIES' CONFERENCE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR -- NOVEMBER 17, 1998
(AS DELIVERED)**

I've been in many situations where my anthem and the anthem of another country were played. But I don't know that I've ever been more moved than I was just now to be with all of you as you sang the anthem of a democratic and peaceful El Salvador. It made me very proud and very grateful to have a chance to be with all of you to witness that. (Applause) It has been a great pleasure for me to visit your country. I am pleased that my friend and your First Lady has invited me, and I am delighted that I have been able to see firsthand today many of the changes that are occurring in your country. This morning we went to a center for domestic violence, where I met a victim of abuse whose husband had beaten her, saying while he did, "You are nothing." Yet today, she spoke about how her life now has meaning and how she has hope in the future, thanks to the services and understanding that she received at this center. It reminded me again how important it is, regardless of what circumstances one finds oneself in, to have hope and to be given the opportunity to believe in yourself again. So the message of today, as we discuss a terrible problem in our hemisphere -- domestic violence -- is that violence in any form, whether conflict with armed combatants or conflict in the home, must be part of our past. And that we must work together to create a peaceful future for everyone.

I also was privileged to meet with some of the remarkable women leaders from across El Salvador's political and economic spectrum. You know many of the women that I met with and there are many others who could have been included in the discussion that Elizabeth and I had. But I am struck by the courage and commitment of the women from all sides of the political spectrum who spoke to me about the real issues confronting this country or any country: education, health care, training, jobs -- the kind of issues that should unite us across any political division. I also understood more clearly the extraordinary strides that have been taken by so many people here since the signing of the Peace Accords six years ago. I am privileged that I could come to El Salvador to be one of many witnesses to this historic transition from war to peace, from violence to reconciliation.

Today my thoughts -- as well as the thoughts of my husband, our government, and the people of the United States -- are also with you as to face a different kind of challenge, the result of the devastation caused by this century's worst storm. I stopped briefly in Honduras and Nicaragua yesterday to announce the United States' disaster relief effort for this region and to express personally the deep concerns of the President and the American people for the people of this area at this difficult time. I was also privileged last evening to announce additional disaster relief for the people of El Salvador to help recover and rebuild their lives and families and communities.

I also hope that you know about the great outpouring of love and concern that is coming from every corner of my country. Food and clothing, medicine and support -- not just from our government -- but from people and churches and communities in

every corner of our nation. It is a reflection of the deep and permanent friendship between our two countries. So many who live in the United States can trace their roots here to El Salvador and they are now contributing to the growth and prosperity of both our nations. There are also close bonds between the religious communities in our countries fueled by a mutual passion for justice and peace.

As I have learned more about how the people of El Salvador have come together, from all walks of life, to support each other in the aftermath of this storm, I can't help but think that the same courage and unbreakable spirit that is sustaining you during this terrible tragedy sustains you also as you also walk down a long and difficult road to peace. You have made remarkable progress. It is sometimes hard when you're in the midst of transition and change perhaps to see everything that you have accomplished. But just think for a minute about what has been achieved. You have reshaped your military and modernized the police to serve the people. You have helped reintegrate combatants into civilian life. You have distributed land to those on both sides of the conflict. You have resettled victims of war. You have begun to rebuild the infrastructures of your communities. You created a Truth Commission that provides an accounting of the human rights violations of the past. And you have made extraordinary progress in strengthening the rule of law, electing a new Supreme Court, reforming your judicial system. For the first time in El Salvador there's a new juvenile code and a new criminal code providing legal protection for women and children. And today the law says clearly that every individual is presumed innocent until proven guilty. Now you are dealing with some of the problems that come in the aftermath of such a transition: a problem of crime, which we know a lot about in our county, seeking to end the violence that is driven by criminals just as you sought to end the violence because of combatants in war.

But perhaps the most profound change is that Salvadorans who once fought on opposite sides of the battlefield are now debating their differences from opposite sides of the aisle in the legislature. And citizens are using ballots instead of bullets to express their disappointments and disagreements. Your efforts here are giving hope to people all over the world. Just think of it, people in Northern Ireland and Bosnia and the Middle East, places like Rwanda or Kashmir, can look to the people and leaders of El Salvador to see how peace and reconciliation can be accomplished -- that divisions can be healed, that forgiveness and compassion can be more powerful than bitterness and anger. My country has been pleased to work with the people of El Salvador and its government during this historic transition to democracy. It is a role that my husband believes very strongly that the United States must play, working with those who would be peacemakers, working with both governments and non-governmental agencies. It is a role that my husband believes reflects the deepest principles of the United States.

I've heard many stories preparing to come here, and even since I've been here, about how so many individuals were able to forgive, leave the past behind, and work with people who were once their sworn enemies in a spirit of cooperation. A former Army Colonel and ex-guerilla fighter, working side-by-side to rebuild schools, roads and wells in a former region of conflict. They embraced on the side of the road, marveling how a few years earlier they had been trying to kill one another. I've heard stories like that in other countries that have also taken the hard, but rewarding road to peace. I remember sitting at a meeting in Cape Town, South Africa across from two men who could not have been more different. One, the General of the Army of the former Apartheid regime, the other a Black Liberation fighter who is now the leader of one of the houses of the legislature. And the white General said "You know, I would have just as soon killed him a few years ago." And the black President in the Senate said "And I would have just as soon responded in kind...but now we know we have much more in common to build a stronger country than we've ever dreamed possible." I've heard of the Mayors of six small towns in one war torn region who came together to put collaboration over conflict, providing their funds to build a road, linking the two most needy and remote villages. As a result, those war-ravaged ghost towns have been transformed into flourishing communities. Bombed-out buildings are the foundations for new homes and silent, deserted streets are now filled with the voices of children. Each of you in this room, I know, has a story that you could tell -- a story of loss, a story of tragedy, a story of disappointment from the past. But I also know you can tell new stories, and those new stories are about rebuilding and moving forward. Despite how difficult that must be for all of you, and how hard it is to live with the memories of lost loved ones, you are setting an extraordinary example for the rest of the world.

The experience that you have gone through is in many ways comparable to what happens with domestic violence. Women have always been the primary victims of war. Women lose their husbands, their fathers, their sons in combat. Women often have to flee from the only homes they have ever known. Women are often the refugees from conflict and sometimes, more frequently in today's warfare, victims. Women are often left with the responsibility, alone, of raising the children. Women are again the victims in crime and domestic violence as well. Throughout our hemisphere we have an epidemic of violence against women, even though there is no longer any organized warfare that puts women in the direct line of combat. But domestic violence is now recognized as being the most pervasive human rights violation in the world. Here in El Salvador, according to the statistics gathered by your government, 1 in 6 women have been sexually assaulted and the number of domestic abuse complaints at just one agency topped 10,000 last year. Between 25 and 50 percent of women throughout Latin America have reportedly been victims of domestic violence.

The problem is all pervasive, but sometimes difficult to see. Every country on earth shares this dark secret. Too often, the women we see shopping at the markets, working at their jobs, caring for their children by day, go home at night and live in fear. Not fear of an invading army or a natural disaster or even a stranger in a dark alley, but fear of the very people -- family members -- who they are supposed to depend upon for help and comfort. This is the trust-destroying terror that attends every step of a victim of violence. For these women, their homes provide inadequate refuge, the law little protection, public opinion often less sympathy. That's why we have to say over and over again, as Elizabeth has done and as so many of you have echoed, that violence against women is not simply cultural or a custom. It is simply criminal, a crime. The devastating effects of domestic violence on women are just as dramatic as the effects of war on women. The physical injury, the mental illness, the terrible loss of confidence limits the capacities of women to fulfill their God-given potentials.

We are also learning about the economic costs that come with domestic violence, in terms of job losses and decreased productivity in the workplace. And we can see and we are beginning to calculate how much money it costs every society where domestic violence is a problem. According to the World Magazine, one work day in every five is lost by women for health reasons associated with domestic violence. Studies by the Inter-American Development Bank, which has done pioneering work in this area, show how domestic violence is a key factor in a country's ability to sustain economic growth. Some of you may have attended the conference on domestic violence that the IDB convened in Washington last year. There is a powerful connection between domestic violence and the unending cycle of women in poverty.

The effects of violence on children is devastating as well. We know that children from families in which women are victims of domestic abuse are three times more likely to require medical care and have a much harder time concentrating and doing well in school. Children of abusive fathers not only repeat the behavior on their own children, but commit violent acts in the larger society as well. Here in El Salvador, the children who are the most vulnerable victims of the war continue to suffer from physical and mental abuse. Over half of El Salvador's street children had a family member killed during the war or saw their homes destroyed, even more of them experienced violence at home.

In the United States, we have done a survey in our prisons, and what we found would not surprise you -- that the vast majority of prisoners are men who themselves were the victims of abuse at the hands of an older relative. The cost of domestic violence in shattered lives, diminished dreams, and weakened economies is devastating. Yet here in El Salvador, you have proven once again that you are unafraid to face difficult problems. And I am very proud that your First Lady is playing a significant role and is known throughout our hemisphere for combating domestic violence. I remember well

when we talked at the White House about domestic violence. It was a subject that was uppermost in her mind, and she went to the Justice Department and spoke to the people in our government who are responsible for fighting domestic violence. Today, I met the people in your government, some of them whom are also responsible for taking on this difficult social, legal, medical, and psychological and economic problem. The United States and USAID has worked with you in your efforts to end domestic violence and expand the rights of El Salvador's citizens. We will continue to be your partner in this effort.

When I visited with Mrs. Calderon Sol at the Salvadoran Institute of Women's Development today, I met the people who are working on the national hotline, and in other programs, designed to help save women and children from violence and then to try, if possible, to work with the women to rebuild their lives and to work with the men to rehabilitate them. ISDEMU is a model of a public-private partnership, leading El Salvador's efforts to combat domestic violence; your combination of legal, social, and economic support for women. There were some very moving moments during my visit this morning. Hearing from a woman who had been the victim of domestic violence for 17 years until she heard on the radio about this place that could perhaps offer her some help. She found her way to it and the counselors and the people there worked with her to rebuild her self-confidence and her sense of self-worth. And they also worked with the perpetrator, the man who had been beating her on a regular basis. And they now have a better understanding of how to live together without violence. There was also a man there who admitted he had been a perpetrator of violence. He didn't like that about himself, but he didn't know where to turn. Again, he found his way to this center and the psychologist worked with him, and he began to understand more about himself and learned how to control his behavior. And now both he and his wife are receiving counseling.

But, perhaps, the most lasting reminder of what the toll of domestic violence is was a display that had been put on the wall of the room where we were meeting. It was an exhibit of some of the weapons that had been used to batter and violate women -- knives, machetes, and wooden clubs. And the medical director told how a one-year old child had been beaten with a wooden spoon until it broke, and that is part of the exhibit as well. This is a problem that occurs in every country and every society. And yet, we know that if there is an epidemic of domestic violence, it has great legal and social effects. So what you have done here, through a series of restored legal reforms, is to give greater rights to women and their families, including the right to free legal counsel and child support. And for the first time in your history, domestic violence is finally called what it is--a criminal offense.

I am pleased that the First Lady is hosting this forum on domestic violence to help put the nation's spotlight on this terrible problem and to build on the remarkable progress that has already been made here. By sharing ideas and forging strategies, and learning from one another, we can work together to bring down the rates of domestic violence. And we can help women end their painful silence. We have learned a great deal about what works to end domestic violence. You have taught the world many of the things that work. I was very struck, as I told Elizabeth, as we went into the National Hotline and there was a woman answering the phones and there was a call that came in while I was there, and then there was a police officer sitting with her with a radio so that he could dispatch help immediately if someone called for that help. I've been in many domestic violence centers, and I've not seen that close cooperation between the people in the center and the police. That's a very, very important step that you have taken. Now I know from my own experience, in my own country, that the police need a lot of training. Many police officers do not recognize the beating of a wife as a crime. That is true in my country, that is true throughout our hemisphere and the world. So, police officers need training, they need help in understanding that domestic violence is a crime.

In my country, many judges do not take domestic violence as seriously as violence from a stranger. Judges need the training and support to understand that a man beating his wife with a wooden club is committing just as much of a crime as a stranger who would beat a woman on her way home from the market. So there is much work to be done to change attitudes and to implant new ideas about what domestic violence truly is. But from what I have seen and what I have learned about what you have already done, you are well on the road, another road for peace and reconciliation. Because for women, in our world today, we have to ensure that they can grow and mature and live their lives in a world that's as free of violence as possible. That means that we have to do more than change laws, as important as those legal reforms are. We have to give women the feeling that they have a right to stand up for themselves. We have to tell them they no longer should be silenced by fear. And we have to ensure that they have access to the tools of opportunity that will enable them to be full and equal partners in their societies.

For women to live free of violence, they must have access to education. It is the single most powerful tool to raise the status of women and girls and it should be the birthright of every citizen of every nation. Many women stay in abusive relationships because they are not educated and do not believe they can find their own way in the world. The more we educate women, the more we will diminish the possibility that any woman will remain the victim of domestic violence.

For women to live free of violence, they must have access to credit. I've seen the lives of women, from many walks of life, changed, transformed as the result of small micro

credit loans. As they became more economically independent, they gained confidence to stand up for their rights in their own families and to play a greater role in their communities.

For women to live free of violence, they must have access to health care for themselves and their children. And if they do have access to health care, they are better able to understand what they need and what they can obtain for themselves and their children and they don't feel so dependant, as they might otherwise.

And for women to live free of violence, we must make good on the central message of the platform for action from the UN Women's Conference in Beijing. That no nation can progress unless every citizen is valued and treated with dignity and given the opportunity to live up to his or her God-given potential.

You have come so very far, and the progress that I have heard about and that I have seen myself suggests to me that El Salvador is well on the way to fulfilling your own dreams of a peaceful, democratic, prosperous and secured future for all of your people in the next century. It will not be easy, nothing worth doing ever is easy. But given the courage and determination of the people in this room and throughout this country, you will be successful. And I am here today to underscore my own country's unswerving commitment to support your efforts -- not only to help you rebuild in the aftermath of the hurricane -- but to help you advance a cause of peace and prosperity that you have sacrificed so much and so long to achieve. As the world celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, I am reminded of the words of one of America's great peacemakers who played an historic role in bringing our countries together in a time of violence and divisions. I speak of Robert F. Kennedy. A few blocks from here, his words, that are so moving to all of us, are embedded in stone. "Some people see things as they are and say why? . . . I dream of things that never were and say why not?"

Well, certainly, El Salvador is where it is today because many people of good faith, with very different opinions came together to say "why not?" The people of El Salvador, the women, the men and the children have a right to dream of a future of peace, justice, and human dignity. And I believe that everything you have done to bring your country to this point, as you continue down this road for the fulfillment of that dream -- will make it possible for all of us, throughout our hemisphere and the world -- to continue to look to El Salvador as a model and example and for that I am very grateful.

Thank you very much and God Bless El Salvador. (Applause)