



**Mary Robinson
Keynote Remarks**

**Opening Ceremony
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President Kenyon, officers and members of the International Federation of University Women:

I am delighted to be able to salute you here in Manchester tonight for the opening ceremony of the Triennial Conference of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW).

I identify very much with the capacity of women in academia to serve as effective agents for change. Although I was never a full-time academic, I taught law for twenty years at Trinity College Dublin, where I now serve as Chancellor. Currently I teach a graduate seminar at Columbia University, and I have links with the University of Pretoria in South Africa and have also been invited to become an Honorary Professor at the University of Peking. The one thing I have avoided—as being much too difficult—is university politics!

University women have contributed through women's centers at universities and through individual studies to our understanding of the different phases of the women's movement in regions around the world, and have led the discussion on gender issues.

I look forward to receiving the report of your collective thinking on women as agents of change, in the context of access to education, the benefits of our information society, and on how to increase the fulfillment of human security and peace.

On that note, I would like to applaud your wisdom in examining the themes of education, information technology and human security together, for they are absolutely interconnected. When our human security is intact, we are free from want, free from fear and free to take action on our own behalf. As the Commission on Human Security

stated in their seminal report, *Human Security Now*, when we are “*protect[ed] from critical and pervasive threats and situations, [we are able to] build upon [our] strengths and aspirations*” to live lives that reflect our inherent dignity and embody the rights to which we are entitled. Human security means that our communities are based on systems “*that give people the building blocks of survival, dignity and livelihood*”. It means that people on the move are protected, that our economic security is intact, that accessible health systems are functioning, that violent conflict is an abstract construct and that basic education is a daily reality for all children, especially girls.

I am reminded of a dimension of human rights that is sometimes overlooked: Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—which states that everyone has duties to the community. It is essential that we reflect on how well our own societies, and particularly those in the poorest countries, are guaranteeing rights like education to their citizens, and how well they ensure that every person, especially the most marginalized, have access to the resources necessary to act with agency in their lives. This is one of the duties we all bear as holders of rights. It tells us that it is only within the context of our community that the “free and full development” of our personalities is possible. As Eleanor Roosevelt, the chair of the eminent group of jurists that drew up the Declaration, once said, “The destiny of human rights is in the hands of *all* our citizens in *all* our communities”. I applaud the community of university women gathered here today for taking this duty seriously, and for accepting the responsibility to work towards a more fair globalization for all, in which human rights and human dignity are respected and upheld.

I would like to spend some time tonight sharing information about another global community of women I am involved with, the Women Leaders Intercultural Forum, WLIF, which is working, like you, to bring about a more secure and just world. WLIF—which includes women in academia—is currently building a network of women leaders across cultures, generations and professional disciplines. Its members are dedicated to taking both individual and collective action to address global issues whose resolution will contribute to the greater enjoyment of security for both individuals and states.

Although WLIF is a new project, we have encountered great enthusiasm from women leaders around the world for its general mission and the changes, both systemic and immediate, it seeks to catalyze in the world. WLIF is working to integrate the perspectives and expertise of women leaders more fully into global decision-making processes. One way we do this is by partnering with select global policy forums, such as the Arab Strategy Forum (pioneered by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai), to ensure that women leaders participate on all panels and that the subject matter prioritized in these gatherings reflects the views of both men and women throughout. This goes beyond one woman per panel, and at most two panels in the program, that focus on “women’s issues”!

This November, along with three other partners, WLIF also will convene the International Women Leaders Global Security Summit in New York. Seventy-five women leaders from government, international organizations, academia and civil society will come together to catalyze more collective action on a broader security agenda that illustrates the links between the security of individuals and the security of states. These women leaders will discuss four topics in depth—climate change, humanitarian intervention, responses to terrorism and economic policy. We also expect they will commit to taking action collectively that supports this more integrated—and we would argue, sustainable—view of global security.

We hope one of the outcomes from this gathering will be a ‘diplomacy force’ of women leaders who will act in concert to resolve some of the most pressing humanitarian and conflict-related crises. While the agenda for this group is still in development, we envisage it will first focus on Africa and the Middle East to ensure that local women leaders are included at the negotiating tables where solutions are crafted. This is not only to guarantee that the human rights principles of participation, empowerment and accountability are upheld. It also serves the very practical aim of ensuring that solutions are sustainable because they incorporate the actual characteristics of the crisis in question, as opposed to only the views of experts working in capitals far away from where they unfold. The women who will participate in WLIF are dedicated to this work because they are aware, like all of you, that the world is increasingly interconnected.

They know that “their community” now stretches farther than the end of the block they live on, or the national borders that surround their country.

I would like to close tonight by returning more explicitly to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by issuing a challenge that another global community, this time comprised of both women and men, are beginning to rally around, as we approach its sixtieth anniversary on December 10, 2008. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights forms the foundation of international human rights law. It is the most important internationally agreed statement of values and shared responsibilities we have. Eleanor Roosevelt, who, as I mentioned earlier, chaired the Human Rights Commission which drafted the Universal Declaration, urged that the Declaration must be written in simple language that could be understood ‘in small places close to home.’ The vision of the drafters was that everyone would share a common birthright, and be engaged in promoting knowledge about it. It was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris on 10th December 1948 as "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote, respect for those rights and freedoms."

Yet the details of its text are still largely unknown in many parts of the world, including here in Manchester. In a world so deeply divided between rich and poor, North and South, religious and secular, us and them, we need more than ever the common values of the Universal Declaration. And we all--civil society, the business sector and governments alike—need tools to hold each other accountable for our performance. The Universal Declaration, which has been affirmed and reaffirmed by all governments over more than half a century, is central to that cause.

In a famous passage Eleanor Roosevelt spelled out how she thought the message of human rights would be promoted in a world recently devastated by two terrible wars and the Holocaust in Europe: [I am changing the text to be gender sensitive to this audience!]

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood she lives in; the school or college she attends; the factory, farm, or office where she works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

Almost sixty years later we need to build on her words, and to recognise that if human rights are to be known and to matter in small places all over the world, they must matter much more in the corridors of power. In the 21st century that means they must matter in the boardrooms of major corporations, in the halls of all universities where the leaders of tomorrow are educated, and also in a personal way through the goodwill and commitment of leaders on every stage.

So, in conclusion, I would urge you all to think about how the International Federation of University Women could join with other organizations like Realizing Rights to launch a massive public information campaign around the Universal Declaration, starting this December 10th – International Human Rights Day – and concluding on 10 December 2008 – the Universal Declaration’s 60th anniversary.

With today’s technologies, we have the means to convey the human rights message in ways never imagined by the men and women who drafted the Universal Declaration. But small human rights organizations like ours need your help to make that possible. This one simple initiative could make a real difference, to empower people not just in one community but in thousands.

Promoting human rights in new and creative ways to mark the Declaration’s 60th anniversary would be a powerful symbol to ordinary people, to governments and to human rights advocates around the world. Less than a decade into the 21st century, it would tell them that there is a commitment to building a future where human rights become a reality for all people.

I hope you will join us in this effort, and I wish you a very successful and productive meeting.

Thank you.