

Power Shortage

September 11, 2020

Giving speeches was not usually a problem for me, but a lot was riding on this one, and I had a genuine case of nerves as I took the stage. Before me were 1,500 delegates, mainly women, of every race and ethnicity, who had traveled to Beijing for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. What they all had in common in that moment was a daunting impassivity.

It was September 5, 1995. I had spent weeks writing and rewriting my speech. I wanted it to be bold, accessible, and unambiguous. I also thought hard about getting the delivery right. Women are often criticized if we show too much emotion in public, and I wanted to make sure my tone didn't obscure the message. Hence, the nerves.

I started [talking](#). As I spoke, each line was translated in real time into dozens of languages, creating a gap between me and the audience. Hundreds of delegates stared back blankly. This was my chance to change the way the world thought about women. And it didn't seem to be going well.

On the flight to Beijing, I had pored over drafts with my speechwriter Lissa Muscatine and the foreign-policy experts crammed into my cabin. Madeleine Albright, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, had asked me a simple question: "What do you want to accomplish with this speech?" My answer had been equally simple: "I want to push the envelope as far as I can on behalf of women and girls."

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Biases and cultural norms that subordinate women are everywhere. The social psychologist [Madeline Heilman found that](#), after looking at two personnel files for potential job candidates, identical except for the names, 86 percent of people surveyed determined that the male candidate was more competent than the female candidate. When they were told that the candidates were equally competent, 83 percent said the man was more likable. And it's not only men who perpetuate these attitudes. The UN Development Program's "[2020 Human Development Perspectives](#)" report found that in developing and developed countries alike, both men and women show clear bias against gender equality. This finding suggests that we have reached an "inequality plateau," at great cost to health, education, autonomy, representation, and more. We need a new approach.

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