

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Public Affairs: Everybody Matters: My Life Giving Voice

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

Mary Robinson, Joanne J. Myers

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I would like to thank you all for joining us on this very special morning as we welcome the first female president of Ireland and the former United Nations commissioner for human rights, Mary Robinson.

Ms. Robinson will be discussing her recently published memoir entitled *Everybody Matters: My Life Giving Voice*, which is an inspiring tribute to her distinguished career as a public servant and the extraordinary life she has led and continues to lead. In many ways, the title says it all, as each word seems to reflect what she has valued throughout her life, a life in which human rights have been the cornerstone of her social activism.

A memoir is considered a special form of autobiography. In this case it is a more candid and personal account of Ms. Robinson's journey and reveals the high moral standing, personal integrity, and determination of one individual who seemed to know from the earliest of days that she wanted to make the world a better place.

Ms. Robinson first rose to prominence as an academic, later becoming a barrister, winning landmark cases on behalf of marginalized people against the prejudices of the day. It wasn't long before she became a member of the Irish Senate and, shortly thereafter, shocked the Irish political system when, in defying the odds, she became the first woman president of Ireland. In so doing, she elevated the country to a new level of international status by promoting the values of liberal democracy and by successfully campaigning for the underdog.

In fighting for controversial changes, she has become an iconic champion of the new Ireland, earning the respect of even her fiercest opponents. Soon thereafter, she accepted [Kofi Annan's](#) invitation to join the United Nations as commissioner for human rights.

All this is but the brief beginning of an illustrious career, one that began in a small village on the west coast of Ireland and has now come full circle. Today Ms. Robinson's campaign for worldwide democracy continues with her work as president of the [Mary Robinson Foundation - Climate Justice](#). Her pursuit of social justice continues as she is committed to leave the world in better condition than

how she found it, always leading by example, acting as a bold, determined catalyst for change.

Some may wonder what the origin is of this brilliant career, this charismatic trailblazer. In searching for an explanation, I confess I encountered a bit of Irish luck when I came across this fragment of a poem by another Irish treasure, [William Butler Yeats](#), who, like Ms. Robinson, also served in the Irish Senate. I believe with these words he conveys what drives those who answer the call to public service, and I quote:

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds.

[An Irish Airman Foresees his Death]

It is my honor and privilege to present to you a most remarkable woman, who through her work expresses the spirit of a nation. Please join me in giving a warm welcome to our guest today, Mary Robinson.

Remarks

MARY ROBINSON: Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen—this is the first time in talking about the book that I have had to say "Excellencies." So you are a special audience as well. And I'd like to thank the Carnegie Council for the opportunity to come here. I know the work of the Carnegie Council and feel very much in tune with your emphasis on ethics and public service.

I would also like to thank Joanne Myers for her warm introduction.

It's a great pleasure to have my co-author, my daughter Tessa, who helped so much. Insofar as the book is a little more open and honest than otherwise, it was because my daughter kept me honest. I wanted the book to be encouraging, hopefully readable, and Tessa helped with that, but more than anything else, she encouraged me in thinking about human rights.

The interesting thing is that the words "human rights" don't mean the same thing in any audience, even a distinguished audience like this. When you hear the words, some of you immediately think of the agenda of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, et cetera—no torture and that. Not too many in this part of the world think of rights to food and safe water, health, education, and human dignity, and the fact that everyone has duties to the community, which is also in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

So I wanted to write a book that encouraged people to feel differently and more personally about human rights, and then by doing that, we would hold governments to account and also now the corporate sector to account.

Where did I get my early interest in human rights? It was from growing up, as you heard, in the west of Ireland, wedged between four brothers, two older than me and two younger than me. So, of course, I had an early interest in human rights, equality, using my elbows. [Laughter]

I was very lucky at the time that my two parents, who were both doctors, very much encouraged me to think that I had as much potential, I had as much right to follow wherever I wanted to go as my four brothers. But that was not the environment in which I was growing up. That as an environment

where women knew their place, and it was very clear that girls could not be altar boys, could not be priests; women had their special place in the home, rather than outside it, unless you either had great talent as a singer or a writer, then you could rise above this containment—or you could become a nun.

I had interesting nuns in my background, as I described, particularly a sister of my father's, who was a nun in India for a long number of years. She wrote back long letters describing her work with poor children there. That seemed to me to be really worth doing. So I decided at the end of my six years in the Catholic boarding school of the Sacred Heart nuns in Dublin that I would go to the reverend mother and say that I wanted to become a nun. She looked at me shrewdly enough and said that perhaps I should go away for a year, and then if I still wanted to enter the convent, they would be delighted.

My parents were very pleased that I was going to be a nun, because they were devout Catholics, but also that they had me for another year. They decided to send me to a boarding school in Paris. And that changed everything. [Laughter] I do describe in the book how that changed everything.

Then I decided to study law and followed my two brothers, who were already studying medicine, to study law in Trinity. Indeed, my two younger brothers followed me later in law. Five of us were in Trinity together, and we had the privilege, if you like, of having our apartment in 21 Westland Row, which was the house where [Oscar Wilde](#) was born. There was a certain tendency of the buses going down Westland Row to point out the house where Oscar Wilde was born. But all I know is that it became known as "Wilde House." That had more to do with my brothers than me. But it was a very interesting time in college.

I was taught law well, but in the classical way, where you had good lecturers who had good notes, and if you could take those notes down rapidly and give them back at exam time, you would probably do quite well. I was thinking very much about the fact that the law in Ireland basically reflected Catholic teaching. There was an equation of sin and crime.

In 1967, having forced myself to debate because I was quite shy, I took part in debating occasions and went out of my way in order to get over that shyness and to be able to stand on my feet and talk—then I was elected as orator of the Law Society. I was the first female student to be elected. I chose as the subject of my inaugural address "Law and Morality in Ireland." This was in 1967. I called for the legalization of family planning, the removal of the ban on divorce that was in the [Constitution](#), that homosexuality between consenting male adults should not be a crime, and suicide should not be a crime.

There was a moment of silence when I finished my speech and then there was quite a lot of applause. Nothing really happened at that time. That was what students did, I think people thought. But, still, it was unusual, I think, at the time.

I was lucky enough then to get a fellowship to Harvard University. I always say that that year in Harvard, 1967 to 1968, was an incredible year that both changed me and gave me a new confidence. It was a time when my contemporaries were questioning what they considered an immoral war, the [Vietnam War](#). My contemporaries were talking about poverty programs in the south of this country, the [civil rights movement](#) in the south of this country, [Martin Luther King's assassination](#) in April, and, just after I graduated, [Robert Kennedy was assassinated](#).

The thing that had the most impact on me was the fact that young people were doing so much, unlike in Ireland, where young people knew their place, and you didn't speak up or you didn't

interrupt adults or you didn't take on responsibility; you waited. But young people weren't waiting. They were saying, "We must do things. We must be prepared to make change."

So I came back to Ireland imbued with what my husband-to-be, who had been in law school with me, [Nick](#), called "Harvard humility." That caused me to stand for the Irish Senate in an election that took place in 1969 and to be elected at the age of 25 as a member of the Senate, breaking the tradition that it was elderly male professors who were elected to the university seats.

I was elected, obviously, with a platform, and top of the platform was to change family planning law in Ireland. I saw it as a very simple idea, because the law wasn't in conformity with reality. Reality was that married women needed a doctor's certificate to get the contraceptive pill. We used to joke that it must be the Irish weather that so many married women needed the doctor's certificate for their cycle regulation problems. It also wasn't against the law to use a condom, but it was against the criminal law to either buy or sell a condom. Analyzing that, clearly an amendment to the criminal law was appropriate.

I completely underestimated the reaction. I had tapped into something that Irish people at the time, especially Irish legislators, did not want to talk about. The bill was never published. I think it's the only example of a bill that was never published, never given a first reading, in our parliamentary system. Of course, the text was in the newspapers, so everybody knew what was in it.

I was denounced from pulpits. The Catholic archbishop at the time, Archbishop [McQuaid](#), said that such a measure would be and would remain a curse upon the country. There was a headline the following day in the Irish press saying "A Curse Upon the Country." I at this time was 26 and just married and very burdened by this, so much so that Nick actually burned some of the hate letters that I had received, which is a pity, because they were now part of archival history.

Gradually, the law was changed in Ireland.

As you heard, I also had the opportunity of taking cases in the court. I think because of the experience in Harvard, because of the way I was taught, I found it very exciting that Ireland not only had our own written Constitution—so you could take very interesting constitutional cases—but we were also members of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, so I took cases for Strasbourg.

We became members in 1973 of the European Union, which had directives on equal pay and equal opportunities, which were more pro-equality than the Irish legislation at the time. So it was possible to take cases in the Irish courts, get a reference to the court in Luxembourg, and then get a binding ruling of the court in Luxembourg that the Irish courts had to apply.

I was still a member of the Senate until 1989, but my law practice was so interesting—I had joined chambers in London—we had three children, and I really saw that I had probably achieved as much as I could in the Senate, and so I retired. I didn't stand again in 1989. I saw my future as being very much as a lawyer.

Then on Valentine's Day in 1990, a [Labour Party](#) friend of mine, [John Rogers](#), came to see me about what I thought was a personal problem or something, the way he described it on the phone—could he see me about something? He said that the Labour Party would like to nominate me as a candidate for the presidency of Ireland. Now, as I think many of you know, the Irish presidency is not like the presidency of the United States or France or many African countries. It's a non-executive presidency. The political power is with the Taoiseach and his cabinet, in a parliamentary system.

There had already been six presidents either elected or appointed by acclamation, if you like, and the Labour Party decided to contest the election. But being the smallest of the three parties with enough seats in the Parliament to be able to nominate, it was quite clear that anybody nominated by the Labour Party wasn't going to win. In fact, it was quite well known that the popular deputy prime minister, Tánaiste [Brian Lenihan](#), was going to be nominated by the biggest party, [Fianna Fáil](#), and would be what we call in Ireland a shoo-in, would definitely get elected.

In fact, the way you know in Ireland what your odds are, of course, is the Irish bookmakers. The odds posted for me when I was nominated—and I was the first nominated—were 100-to-1 against.

But, actually, I had been fascinated when I read again the provisions of the Constitution, which I had up to then largely ignored, relating to the presidency and that oath of office to serve the people of Ireland. Somehow, I realized that my predecessors had performed well as formal heads of state, both internally and serving Ireland abroad, but had not actually had a relationship with the people of Ireland, except on very rare occasions, with red carpets and a band—very august. I had had an opportunity during the presidential campaign to see what was happening in 1990 in Ireland, the amount of local community self-development, the way in which the word *meitheil*, which is an Irish word that's somewhat like *ubuntu* in sub-Saharan Africa—it comes from our agricultural background—was practiced.

When I was growing up in Mayo, I would go out on house calls with my father, as a doctor, and I would see all the farmers coming to one field with the one tractor these two days and then moving to the next field. If that farmer was sick, those fields were still done. That was the spirit of *meitheil*.

I had seen that this was very much the kind of mood at the time, in 1990, in Ireland. I felt that an elected president should be very close to all of these issues and could really serve in a complementary way to the political power, locally, nationally, and internationally.

When I was elected, in the moment of the election and the excitement of the result, I thanked in particular the women of Ireland because, although I was elected by men and women—because the whole population that could vote was voting—I knew that a very significant number of wives had gone out without telling their husbands and voted, or daughters had gone out without telling their fathers.

At the same time, I also said that I would put a light in the window of my official residence, which has an Irish name, *Áras an Uachtaráin*—I was to be the Uachtaráin; *áras* is the house. I would put a light in my official residence for all of those who had had to leave Ireland, who had had to emigrate. I completely underestimated the power of that light. But it taught me that, as a non-executive president, symbols would be important—the symbol of shaking the hand of friendship with the communities of Northern Ireland and, indeed, going to Republican West Belfast and, controversially, having to shake the hand of [Gerry Adams](#), but nonetheless helping to create a climate of peace.

What was more difficult for me was how I was going to fulfill my inaugural address saying that I wanted, on behalf of Ireland, to play a role internationally. That just came about. There was a terrible [crisis](#) in Somalia, as many of you will remember, in 1992. I was asked by the Irish aid agencies, Concern and *Trócaire* and *Goal*, would I go to Somalia and go to the United Nations and draw attention to what was happening.

Nick and I went to Somalia. It was very shocking to see the long queues at the feeding stations, the difficulty of the food getting there because of the fighting warlords. I spoke to both warlords at the time. We traveled to Mogadishu, to Baidoa, et cetera. We saw the injuries from the conflict, the

displaced people, and so on.

I was very affected by it and came to the United Nations and spoke to [Boutros Boutros-Ghali](#), the secretary-general at the time, and that led to follow-up—some of it, for this country, not very happy follow-up—of trying to help Somalia at that time.

Two years later, in 1994, after the [genocidal killing](#), I was the first head of state to go to Rwanda. Again, I saw the aftermath of a killing of that kind, which you never forget.

In 1995, I was invited to represent Ireland at the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. I sort of knew that these occasions are rhetorical occasions where people make wonderful speeches. So I decided to go back to Rwanda and try to bring the suffering and the huge burden on the Rwandan government of its prison population, of its post-genocidal situation to the table, if you like; which I did, both in a speech at Yale and also my seven minutes in the United Nations. I stuck to my seven minutes and still got the message across.

My third visit as president of Ireland to Rwanda was when I accepted an invitation in March 1997 to a pan-African women's conference. Those women, those widows in Rwanda had the spirit and the courage to have a pan-African women's conference. I was one of two non-African women there. A vice president was there, ministers, writers, community workers. They came from various countries.

I think that that was what set Rwanda on a very positive course, of necessity, recognizing that women had to be central to Rwanda's development. As we know, it has been remarkable, how much has been achieved.

I didn't seek a second term as president of Ireland. I was actually wondering what I would do after the seven years, when the first high commissioner for human rights, [José Ayala Lasso](#), resigned suddenly to go back to Ecuador to become foreign minister. I kind of heard a rumor at the time that it was because the job was just impossible.

When I told the Irish government that I would very much like them to support my candidature as high commissioner for human rights, I was warned—"The office is small. It's underfunded. It's difficult. There maybe are other positions in the UN even that would be better to look at." But I was a human rights person, and I felt, no, it would be a great honor to give leadership on human rights in the United Nations.

So the Irish government put me forward with a very vigorous campaign, and Kofi Annan chose me. Then he put pressure on me to come a little bit early, which was not very well received in Ireland. I deal with that a little bit in the book.

But when I took up the post in September 1997, I did find that the office was not in a good state. There was great pressure because the July reform package of the United Nations had given the office of high commissioner a new status as part of the four executive committees to mainstream human rights throughout the UN system.

I remember having a conversation with Kofi Annan in the early stages, and I said to him, "I'm very pleased, first of all, that you've created a situation where there's not going to be a separate center for human rights and office of the high commissioner in Geneva. You've brought them together, and that's helpful. But what did you mean about mainstreaming human rights in your package?"

He sort of looked at me with a smile and he said, "That's for you to figure out, Mary."

It was a big challenge to be there at the table in peacekeeping, in development, in humanitarian issues, in economic and social rights. More often than not, if there wasn't a human rights representative—me or one of my staff—there, human rights didn't necessarily come to the surface very easily or come to the fore.

There were so many other pressures. The treaty bodies felt they were understaffed. The special rapporteurs felt that the conditions under which they had to travel were very difficult. But most of all, my own staff had very short contracts—three-month or six-month contracts. Many of them had been there for years with no real security. I found I had a management problem that I had totally underestimated.

So I started getting up earlier and staying in the office longer, and then taking sleeping pills. By Christmas of 1997, my health was undermined, and when I arrived home, I was not in a good place. I didn't want to write about that, actually, and Tessa said, "I remember. I remember what it was like. And if you don't write that, it won't have the same impact."

So I do in the book indicate—and, actually, it was a brother of mine, who was a doctor, who came back from New Zealand, who said exactly the right thing, brother to sister. He said to me, "Mary, you'd better watch it or you'll be in breakdown territory." I didn't like a brother saying that to me, so I pulled myself together, threw away the sleeping pills, and more or less took time in our home in the west of Ireland to take walks, just steady myself.

When I came back, I realized, "It's a hard job to do to conduct the office, but we've got to do it. Also the way in which I'm going to try to fulfill this job is to not have the power of a big stick or anything, but to go where the victims of human rights are suffering and bring back their stories."

So for the five years, as it turned out, I went to the places where there were very severe violations of human rights. I remember going to [Chechnya](#) and coming back during the Commission of Human Rights, as it was called then, and the commission passed a resolution against the Russian Federation, the first resolution against a P5 country, which was very significant.

I went to [Sierra Leone](#) with a delegation, including former president [Masire](#) of Botswana, and to [East Timor](#) a couple of times and to [Colombia](#) and to the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) and so on. That, for me, was an important part of making visible the violations of human rights and insisting and trying to support civil society in holding to account.

But I was also very conscious of the importance of stressing economic and social rights. I found that my seven visits to China as high commissioner were particularly interesting. I deal with those in some detail in the book. As a former president, I had access to President [Jiang Zemin](#) in a way that if I'd just been even a minister and then became high commissioner, I wouldn't have had. That was very interesting.

I didn't intend to serve a second term after the four years, but there was a lot of pressure from grassroots when I announced this. So I discussed it with Kofi Annan and we agreed that I would serve one more year.

Meanwhile, during that year, 2001, we were preparing for the most difficult task, the [World Conference Against Racism](#). As many of you will know, that was very controversial. Ultimately, the United States and Israel withdrew before the end of the conference because of the language in square brackets, which was anti-Semitic, which was unacceptable to them. I kept emphasizing that we would get that language out, that we had to get that language out, before the end of the

conference. There had been two previous attempts to have a successful World Conference Against Racism, and they had failed. I was determined.

Thanks, in many ways, to the European Union, to [Louis Michel](#), the Belgian chair of the European Union at the time, Europe stayed, Canada stayed, and we did get a text that was free of all that language. Actually, [Shimon Peres](#), the foreign minister of Israel at the time, said, "That's great. Israel has won. There's nothing in that language that would trouble us."

That was on the 8th of September 2001. I went for a short holiday to the west of Ireland, and on the 11th of September, I, like all of us in this room, remember where we were for the terrible [attacks](#) in this country. That, of course, made the issue of support for human rights much more difficult. I write about that in the book. It wasn't just that I had a mandate to ensure that the United States, as all other countries, would uphold its commitments under the [Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) and the [Convention Against Torture](#), but when the United States dipped its standards, this had a bad knock-on effect in other countries, where I would be trying to also get them, with fewer democratic checks and balances, to stop curtailing freedom of the press, to stop calling political opponents terrorists and so on.

So it was a very difficult year. I came to New York and spent eight years based in New York, with colleagues in the Aspen Institute in Washington and with colleagues in Geneva, focusing on promoting economic and social rights in African countries—rights to health, to decent work, to peace and security, with a particular focus on women's peace and security.

Because we were very small as an organization, which wasn't, in fact, going to be permanent—it was piloting—we were working with a lot of partners. I was traveling to a lot of African countries during those eight years. I heard over and over again what I called the "ah-but" sentence: "Ah, but things are so much worse." "Ah, but it's so much harder now." It was all to do with changes in the weather, changes in the climate, climate shocks, longer periods of drought and flash flooding. It was undermining poverty, undermining livelihoods.

In Liberia, [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#) would say to me, "When I was growing up, we had predictable rainy seasons. That's not true anymore. We don't know when the rainy season will come or for how long. I can't mend my roads. It's really very serious."

So the story was a top-down and a bottom-up one, and it was all over. And I realized that this is a huge human rights issue.

So I returned to Ireland and established the Mary Robinson Foundation - Climate Justice. Climate justice, first of all, begins with the injustice of the fact that climate is impacting more severely on the most vulnerable, because they live in vulnerable conditions anyway, and they are the least responsible. So that's one sense of injustice.

The other is the intergenerational injustice. I put it in very personal terms. Nick and I have four grandchildren, the eldest of whom is 9. They will be in their 40s in 2050. They will share the world with 9 billion others. I ask myself, "What will they say about us? What will they say?"

I have a great fear that they will say, "How could they have been so selfish? How could they have been so uncaring? How could they have been so stupid not to realize that we have to have a climate agreement," as is now being committed to by governments by 2015. It has to be a rigorous climate agreement that does keep us below 2 degrees warming over pre-industrial standards, and we have to have a good post-2015 agenda with both, a robust follow-up to the [Millennium Development](#)

Goals—because many countries still have not reached those and won't reach them by the end of 2015—and sustainable development goals that apply to all countries.

The last thing I want to say is that my small foundation has linked with the World Resources Institute in Washington, D.C. We are working together on a climate justice dialogue. What we want to do is actually change the narrative on climate change, to change the story, so that when people hear the words "climate change," they don't think about melting glaciers or a polar bear on an ice floe—and I have nothing against polar bears—or the science that is contested, but they will think about people. It's about people. It's about people who are already affected, and it's not fair. It's about more and more people in all countries who are going to be affected if we don't take our responsibility.

So it does get me up quite early in the morning. I am very, very passionate about it. It is a huge human rights issue.

Now I'd be very happy to take any questions. Thank you very much.

Questions

QUESTION: Warren Hoge, International Peace Institute.

I want to ask you about a dilemma that's facing human rights people like yourself, and that is the role of the International Criminal Court. We already have a case where a president, **Bashir** of Sudan, has been charged. We may have a new case coming at us right now with the **newly elected president** of Kenya, who is suspected of crimes against humanity.

There are people, I think sincerely, on both sides of the issue, who say you have to bring people to account before the court; otherwise, you are permitting impunity. The other side, a sincere side also, says if you do that, you obviate the possibility of working with that person to get rid of the crime against humanity that's at issue.

I'm sure you face this dilemma in your work. Is there one side that is right or wrong?

MARY ROBINSON: Thank you for that easy question.

I was a very strong supporter of the International Criminal Court, and indeed still am. When I was serving as high commissioner for human rights, I went to Rome for discussions on the statute. But I think we do need to think very seriously about how it can be most effective.

I've been thinking about the **situation** in Kenya, which I know you have been referring to. The **killing** after the last election, and the rape, was terrible, but it wasn't out of all proportion. It wasn't genocidal in a full sense. It perhaps could have been dealt with in the courts in Kenya, because the courts in Kenya are courts that can deal. It's not as if there was an absence of possible justice. I'm not sure that sometimes it may not be more prudent to wait, and if there's a total failure, to deal then. In other words, to come in early with the big stick may not be helpful, as it clearly is part of the difficulty now in Kenya.

But I do believe that the International Criminal Court is necessary and has to serve its purpose. But I think we need, in the light of experience, to recognize that there may be a pacing or a sequencing of when it's appropriate to invoke that jurisdiction.

That's the only wisdom I would have.

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

You are such an exemplary person for the possibilities for women, both in yourself and for what you have been doing for women's rights as human rights. What do you think are the prospects now for women's rights, for example, in the Middle East? Some of us attended a panel discussion by African women who are trying to deal with a situation where very often their rights are repressed and they are forced back into their homes and so on. What can be the future for women in such situations?

MARY ROBINSON: Thank you for the question.

It's certainly true that I think a great deal about women's rights and women's leadership. When I was elected president, I was doing it very positively as a woman, as the first woman president. I'm also now, in the climate context, trying to be innovative. We have a link of women on climate change, leaders, who have to listen to women at grassroots.

But more specifically to the issue of countries where women are in a context that's not dissimilar from the one I was growing up in, in the west of Ireland, where women were supposed to know their place. But in Ireland we didn't face early child marriage or female genital cutting or other things that can be faced. I think it's very important—and that's the encouraging part, if you like, of the book—that things can change. In my experience, both in the Middle East and in Africa, women are doing an extraordinary amount. Sometimes we don't support enough what women are doing themselves, both in becoming ministers, becoming leaders, and also at the grassroots, being leaders of their community.

I think the most important thing is to resist a question that I used to be asked a lot as high commissioner for human rights: "But surely what you stand for are Western rights. They're not part of our culture."

I think we have to address that by saying that it's not culture you are talking about; it's traditional practices. Insofar as they are harmful traditional practices, they are not acceptable as being part of international human rights standards. Early child marriage is a good example, and, as I mentioned, genital cutting. It's very much to encourage women.

I also think that we need to make women more visible at the table in various ways, not just doing the work on the ground.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. I'm Paul Seger. I'm the Swiss permanent representative.

I just want to refer to this story you told us about 1968, when you were in Harvard, the young people standing up for rights and values. If you look now, in 2013, at young people today, do you still feel the same mood as back in 1968?

MARY ROBINSON: It's a very interesting question. My focus, as I've mentioned, is very much on addressing issues of justice and climate. I find young people are really taking this on, including students. Student leaders—including Harvard, Princeton, Yale—are all now taking on this issue, looking for disinvestment of fossil fuel companies.

I think perhaps the inequalities in countries and between countries are beginning to impact on young people, who, by and large, can tend to be more idealistic. That's simplifying, but I think there is an idealism in young people. I certainly find I'm bowled over by the enthusiasm of young people for the link between climate and justice, and that idea of addressing—because they see it. It's their future.

They are going to be there, and their children and grandchildren are going to be suffering in a very real way if we don't act.

QUESTION: James Starkman, Yale 1956.

I just wonder if you would comment on the [decline of the Irish banking system](#) from 2007 on and its early renaissance at the present time. What is the current status of that?

MARY ROBINSON: Interestingly, you have asked me a question that's more difficult for me to answer, because part of the answer is to look at the political realities that caused the very severe fall of the Celtic Tiger on its nose and then the aftermath of that—the banking system, the foolish bankers and the foolish property developers and the climate at the time that encouraged cheap mortgages so people got in over their heads. As a non-executive president, I have to be very careful not to comment in any depth on a situation like that. It's actually a very good tradition, because it keeps the presidency out of the political realm.

So I feel a restraint even here, because you never know who's going to hear you.

QUESTION: William Verdone.

I'm a trustee of a women's college connected with the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur. My question is about women's education. The founder of the college—and I'd like your impressions on this—he said that if you empower a woman, you enrich a community. That's what we're doing.

Where do you see women's education and success maybe five, ten years down the road, in India, Bangladesh, and in some of those other countries in Southeast Asia?

MARY ROBINSON: I profoundly believe in what you just said. It's just extraordinary the difference it makes. I think most development analysts now know that educating the girl is the quickest return on good development and that it will change the local community, it will reduce maternal and child deaths—all of those indicators.

I've seen this. I was at the [conference](#) in Doha on climate, but before that, I attended an event that the Masdar Institute organized in Dubai. It was entirely women, women scientists, young women scientists. I was so impressed with what they were doing and just the dedication of the way they were doing it and their sense of making a difference.

I saw the country, in January, when I was in Malawi—I chaired the Global Leaders Council for Reproductive Health, because I still feel that reproductive health and family planning are essential to women's empowerment, and girls'. [Joyce Banda](#), as vice president, had been a member of the council and she still remained as president. She has an initiative for safe motherhood. We were there to support her, a number of members of the council.

I identified with the population of Malawi because in the 1960s, it was about 3 million, which was the population of the Republic of Ireland at that time. The population of Malawi now is just over 15 million. By 2050, it will be 50 million. By the end of the century, it will be 120 million, on all the predictions of the World Bank and the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme, et cetera. The birth rate is 5.7 per family. Why? There are no secondary schools for girls. Girls get pregnant very early or get married very early. There is huge early marriage. There is no option.

We're going to hear more and more words put together that I never want to hear put together

—"population control." That's not the way. We know what works: Educate girls and women, have health systems that bring down maternal and child deaths, and the population will become more balanced. That's the way to do it.

So the education of girls is absolutely essential. It's also a wonderful experience, as you clearly know.

QUESTION: My name is Tsuneo Nishida, Japanese permanent representative to the United Nations.

I have a little bit of a peculiar question, but it is very serious from my country's point of view. I'm talking about North Korea. Last week we saw a Security Council sanctions resolution against a [nuclear test](#) and a missile launch. We are now talking about, in Geneva, a Human Rights Council resolution on human rights in North Korea.

Of course, I'm not saying that North Korea is the most brutal regime. It is not necessarily the country where the human rights violations are the worst. But this regime is not only brutal and isolated, it also has such a huge military arsenal, including nuclear bombs and long-range missiles, of course bio- and chemical weapons.

This is the first time that we have as a neighbor, a rogue country with WMD. So we have been struggling how to really resolve this issue.

Based upon your very rich experiences in so many capacities and, of course, your conviction to address women and others, what do you think? What can the international community, the United Nations, do to address this very serious issue? This is a real issue.

MARY ROBINSON: Thank you for the question.

In fact, in answering it, I have to mention another hat that I wear that I describe in the book. I was honored to be invited to join the [Elders](#) that [Nelson Mandela](#) brought together. I do emphasize that I'm one of the younger Elders.

We went to North Korea because President [Jimmy Carter](#) is one of the Elders, and he had been to North Korea a year or so before and was invited to bring the Elders, which was interesting.

It was very strange. It was my first visit. [Gro Brundtland](#), who was with us, who had been there as director-general of the World Health Organization, was shocked to find that there was very little improvement in health. In fact, the hospital we visited had no running water.

[Martti Ahtisaari](#) was the fourth person. He, like me, had not been there before.

We had two agendas, basically. One was to address the nuclear issue and try and get some opening for discussion. The other was to look at the food situation, because there was an even worse food situation. There had been foot-and-mouth disease and very bad flooding in the previous months. The North Koreans were actually desperate for the United Nations and donors to provide more food aid, and the donors were worried that this would be hived off to the military.

I think I would say that the Elders feel that it is important that we somehow find an opening for dialogue. That is possibly the most important thing, to try to engage. There's a young [leader](#). Nobody quite knows, apart from his [interest in basketball](#), what the entry point is. I'm not joking, because, like you, I think it's an extraordinarily serious situation.

I see the response to the pressure from the Security Council. I'm not sure whether the response to the Human Rights Council will actually be the kind of opening we need. I think we do need to try to find ways—certainly I know that the Elders would be willing to return if that would be helpful, if there was that opening, because we do feel it's important.

We had to be restrained in what we said about human rights issues there, because we had the overriding concern about the nuclear issue and the food shortage. But it is an extraordinarily difficult and dangerous situation, not just for the region, but for the world.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. [Guillermo Rishchynski](#), Canadian ambassador to the United Nations.

Madame Robinson, you are someone who has spent an entire lifetime in the defense of human rights. As we look around the world, in many instances we see the trappings of democracy, but, in fact, political space and the ability for individual expression seems to be constricted in far too many places. Is this simply a moment in time? Are you concerned about that trend? What do you see that needs to be done from the point of view of getting the agenda on human rights back to where it was, perhaps, a decade ago, when it seemed to be in full flourish, and now seems to be, in many parts of the world, in retreat?

MARY ROBINSON: Again, it's a broad question and hard to do justice to in a fairly brief answer. But I do think quite a bit about it. We talk about it, obviously, in the Elders when we're looking at the conflict situations that we're trying to address.

In a way, I do think that the so-called [war on terrorism](#) and its aftermath did undermine very significantly human rights. It did so in particular because of the failure to uphold the standards. You cannot promote democracy and human rights unless you live by those standards. I think that's one of the criticisms, the criticism of double standards, that has complicated the situation.

On the positive side, we now have a world that's communicating more than ever before. It is possible for civil society to begin to hold more to account.

Something that you may not have expected me to mention in responding to your question—I take a lot of hope from a recent move of the Human Rights Council, a unanimous move of the Human Rights Council, to support the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) that Professor [John Ruggie](#) put forward. The private sector is so important now in our world and in different countries. That framework has said very clearly that governments have a duty to protect people from violations of their human rights by corporations, that all corporations have a responsibility to respect all human rights, and that we need better remedies. To have the Human Rights Council unanimously endorse that is the beginnings of being able to broaden that sense of responsibility.

Ultimately, the problem with human rights, as we all know, is implementation. The way to get implementation is to have governments and the corporate sector now held to account. And the way that that happens is, by and large, civil society.

I think we need to continue the struggle of human rights, but also very much in the emerging economies with their middle class, that they will sort of take hold of the need for shared values and that they are the values of human rights and that their government in the Human Rights Council does subscribe, but it's not implemented on the ground.

It's always a struggle. But I think there are positive means of communication that can be very helpful

now.

QUESTION: My question is about the [United Nations Global Compact](#). Is that having an effect?

MARY ROBINSON: I was high commissioner when Kofi Annan launched that, and I served on the board of the Global Compact for a number of years. I think it's good that a significant number of companies have signed up to it. But there's a certain sense of "blue rinse," that it's too easy; it's not challenging enough.

I prefer the regime of Professor John Ruggie, the Guiding Principles. He has said that all corporations have a responsibility to respect all human rights. It's not just a "do no harm." It's a due-diligence standard. You've got to know what's happening in your supply chain. You've got to know whether they are using militia in countries to deter people locally from your pipeline or whatever it is. You've got to know what you're doing to indigenous peoples or those without proper land rights in development and so on—the many problems.

The voluntary posting of what you are doing in one area, but not necessarily covering what you might be doing in other areas—it has been good in one way: creating an awareness that corporations should take a responsibility. But I prefer now the soft law of the UN Guiding Principles.

QUESTION: Matthew Olsen.

I was talking to a friend who is involved in the sorts of things that you're involved with. He told me that he's just back from a conference in Africa, and in Africa, there is a serious problem developing with land acquisition, dispossessing the peasants, for lack of a better word at the moment. Could you comment on that?

MARY ROBINSON: Yes, it's something that Oxfam has been particularly focusing on. I was honorary president of Oxfam, until the end of last year, for about 10 years. It is happening. It's stunning, the amount of land in Africa that has been acquired by countries or corporations from outside Africa. It's being acquired in ways that are not even necessarily giving the best deal to—whether it's the government or those who can influence the system and do that.

At the same time, the population of African countries is going to double by 2050, and food security is going to be much, much more difficult because of climate change.

I'm very glad to say—and you give me an opportunity to mention it—that next month, during Ireland's six-month presidency of the European Union, the Irish government and my foundation are hosting an EU presidency conference in Dublin called [Hunger, Nutrition, Climate Justice](#).

We need to address hunger in our world today. Almost a billion people—the figures that people talk about are 925 million—are hungry in our world. Children wake up hungry, go to bed hungry, die of hunger. There are actually hungry children in this country because of the inequalities. We really need to have a sense that in the 21st century no one should actually be going hungry. We are human beings in the world together. We need to focus on what works in food production, particularly in developing countries, which this conference will focus on.

A third of the participants will come from different parts of the world who actually are showing how to cope with the climate shocks, how to be climate-resilient, have different plants, a different diversity of products in order to provide food production.

Food and water are going to be in crisis situations this century in many parts of the world, and we need to address that.

Thank you for your question.

QUESTION: Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*.

There was a great deal of hope with the [Arab Spring](#), so-called. But that seems to have passed. The moment is gone, perhaps, as new regimes come in that are even more authoritarian than before. We have the problem also in the rest of Africa with the rise of [al-Qaeda](#).

What do you see for both regions, the Middle East and North Africa?

MARY ROBINSON: Another easy question.

I think there is a lot of concern. There had been great hopes raised by the Arab awakening, the young people and women coming out and wanting a different government. Those people are still there. They haven't gone away. And they are the most disappointed by what is happening, particularly in [Egypt](#), to some extent, and Tunisia.

I think we have to recognize that things don't often happen very quickly in a very positive way. It has taken a long time for countries that are now benefiting from more stable democratic regimes to build up that. So I think we need to recognize that that is the case.

I don't think, if I could put it this way, that the genie will go back into the bottle. I think there still will be that yearning for—and that's what brings people out into the streets, young people. They are communicating. Social media is very important to create spaces for people that can speak freely and express that yearning.

I do share your concern about the al-Qaeda affiliates across Africa, most recently in [Mali](#) and various parts of the Sahel. I think it is very worrying.

Another real worry—and I'm glad that Kofi Annan is taking a lot of leadership on it—is drugs and criminality, particularly into western Africa. These are issues.

But I serve on the board and the prize committee of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation for African leadership, and that foundation tends to bring out the positive, if I could put it that way. And by the same token, there are a lot of positive developments in African countries. I think we're going to see more and more of that and a lot more desire to now build up a tax base, tackle corruption, and give that kind of leadership. There are young leaders in Africa and young women who want to see change.

So there are concerns, but there's also a very positive story from Africa.

JOANNE MYERS: I think your story and you are an inspiration to us all. Thank you for taking us on this journey. Really, it has been wonderful.

Audio

In this inspiring talk about her extraordinary life so far, Mary Robinson tells us of her early years and how she became president of Ireland, even though the odds were 100-1; her work as a champion of human rights, especially those of women; and about her current work as president of the Mary Robinson Foundation - Climate Justice.

Video Clip

TV Show

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