



## If Women's Rights Are Human Rights They Must Be Powerfully Claimed

Hillary Clinton's groundbreaking speech at the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 became a flashbulb memory for many of us. For Gloria, who was in the room where it happened not once but twice, it's a moment she comes back to again and again. In this episode, she shares highlights of her experience, reflects on the significance of Clinton's words 25 years later, and helps us identify the missing piece that to this day makes it hard for women all

over the world to exercise those rights fully.

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Gloria Feldt: Like I always say, just when you think it's over, it starts all over again. And women's quest for equality is no exception. Hello, and welcome to Power to You. I'm Gloria Feldt, here with secrets and tools to prepare and propel you with training and coaching to harness your incredible power to in your professional life. I co-founded Take the Lead because I figured out how to crack the code that has been holding women back from equal leadership and pay. My mission is for women and men to hold equal power, pay, and leadership positions by 2025. At the end of each podcast, I'll share specific tips that will help you lead and succeed.

You know that great song in the play, Hamilton, [The Room Where It Happens](#)? Well, I was in the room where it happened 25 years ago. Two rooms where it happened, actually. The experience was life-changing. World-changing, even. But that was then. I was reminded of the anniversary of the event when I read Hillary Clinton's article in The Atlantic October 2020 issue, entitled [Power Shortage. Women's rights are human rights. But rights are nothing without the power to claim them.](#) When I read that title, I thought about how we make the mistake over and over again when we think that once a decision is made, a deed done, a right won or claimed, that the quest is over, and we can go onto the next thing. And I confess that a little smile came onto my face as I realized that Secretary Clinton has realized exactly what I've been saying and [teaching women to do for the last decade.](#) Embrace their power to claim their rights, and more importantly, to act on them intentionally.

In her article, Clinton recounts how she wrote the [iconic speech](#) in which she came to make the famous declaration that stirred the 17,000 women and men

attending the official [U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing](#), and over 30,000 attending the ancillary nongovernmental organization conference in the suburb of Huairou. The nongovernmental organizations or NGOs had been sent to this suburb of Beijing because the powers that be in Beijing were afraid that all of us feminists were going to do something radical in town, and so they didn't want us there. But we were there, and it rained every day. It was muddy, mucky, but that did not stop the great feeling of sisterhood, nor did it stop the optimism about the opportunities that we had to actually do some world-changing things.

Hillary Clinton's speech made first page headlines globally when she said, "Women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights." It was an incredibly bold statement on its face, and the fact that it was made by the First Lady of the United States of America gave it singular force. I think it's not an exaggeration to say that all of us there felt like a [seismic shift in thinking about women](#) was taking place and that it had the potential to change the world forever. It must have had that same Earthshaking effect on people that 19th-century suffragists had on cultures that had never imagined women voting before they started advocating for it.

As the saying goes, first they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they try to kill you, and then you win. Winning is always a fragile bird. Just look at how even 100 years after American women won the right to vote and the law was written into the U.S. Constitution, we are facing myriad ways factions within our country are working to suppress the vote for everyone. So, we relearn these lessons over and over. It's one step back for every one-and-a-half steps forward, and just when you think the fight for equality is over, we find that a new battle has opened nearby.

So it was at that groundbreaking conference when Clinton gave her speech in 1995. I was privileged to be in that room when Hillary Clinton first delivered her women's rights are human rights message because I had a press pass that let me into the official delegates auditorium. I had been asked by the Arizona Republic, I was living in Phoenix at the time, to write about my experience at the conference. This gave me access to a number of behind the scenes events I wouldn't otherwise have been privy to.

The speech was an incredibly uplifting moment. Though the Chinese government tried to quash media carrying the speech, the women in the room and those who were standing outside close enough to hear it on the sound system were moved to tears and cheers. Of recognition when Clinton spoke of the plight of women globally, and of joy that a leader of the free world had the courage to speak up and articulate a new vision for women. Yes, declaring that women have rights and that they are inseparable from any other human rights, that was a bold statement on its face. And it was controversial. Politically risky, because it flew right in the face of Chinese human rights violations that Clinton fully intended to skewer with her words.

Her 11 powerful words framed the agreements that came out of the conference and would ultimately be signed onto by most of the world's nations. Women's rights exist and they are human rights. Novel idea.

Well, the next morning I was in the room where Clinton delivered basically the same speech at the NGO conference. That was quite a different scene. Thousands of women and a few men, including my husband, Alex, stood in the rain and mud at 5:00 AM, waiting for a 9:00 AM door opening. We were so close together that we formed a colorful canopy of umbrellas outside the auditorium that would hold the few hundred of those of us fortunate enough to get in. Looking back, I feel like Forrest Gump, serendipitously witnessing historic events.

Clinton was late arriving, and the crowd was getting restless, so at one point a woman named Shirley Mae Springer-Staten from Anchorage, Alaska, went onto the stage and started singing acapella. The song she sang had the refrain, "Gonna keep on moving forward, never turning back, never turning back." Pretty soon, the whole auditorium joined her, and the room reverberated with the song that expressed our hopes that true equality would come when women's rights were understood as human rights. We were never turning back.

In her quarter-century retrospection, Clinton wrote these words: "Twenty-five years after Beijing, it's no longer enough to talk about women's rights. We must augment women's power in every sphere, including government, the economy, and national security. We can start by taking steps to increase women's representation in the public and private sectors, whether by exploring quotas for gender parity in public office, broadening the success of gender-blind orchestra auditions to other employers, removing names from resumes, or following the lead of states where asking about salary history is now illegal. We can demand that elected officials and employers alike recognize paid leave, affordable child care, and closing the gender pay gap as the urgent imperatives they are. We can build women's economic power, including by investing in women-led businesses. And as we recover and rebuild after the pandemic, we can seize the opportunity to transform economic systems that discriminate against women and devalue essential caregiving work."

You know, I wrote a book called *No Excuses: Nine Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power*. The most shocking insight I gained when I was writing it was that while we have with great effort changed many laws and opened many doors, and even though it is true that external barriers of policy and implicit bias remain, there is something else holding us back: our own ambivalent relationship with power, which is culturally learned, t's not hardwired, keeps us from having intentions to lead at the level that would bring gender parity to power, pay, and position. We must use our power for equal rights to be meaningful.

So, I am so glad that Hillary Clinton has had the same realization, yet I'm sad that it [remains necessary to talk about the need for women to have the power to exercise their hard-won rights](#). Looking into my notes from the Fourth World

Conference on Women, I was reminded that in her NGO speech, Clinton included this poem to break the silence. It had been given to her by a young woman from Delhi just before Clinton delivered her iconic declaration. [The poem goes like this:](#)

“Too many women in too many countries speak the same language of silence. My grandmother was always silent, always aggrieved. Only her husband had the positive right, or so it was said, to speak and to be heard. They say it is different now. After all, I am always vocal and my grandmother thinks I talk too much. But sometimes I wonder. When a woman fights for power as all women would like to, quietly or loudly, it is questioned. And yet there must be freedom if we are to speak, and yes, there must be power if we are to be heard. And when we have both freedom and power, let us not be misunderstood. We seek only to give words to those who cannot speak. Too many women in too many countries. I seek only to forget my grandmother’s silence.”

After Clinton read that poem, she commented, “That is exactly the kind of feeling that literally millions and millions of women feel every day.” And you know, everyone in the audience could feel she spoke from experience. But now I reflect that the young girl who gave Clinton that poem knew ahead of her time that there must be power if we are to be heard. There must be power if we are to be heard. There must be power if we are to lead effectively. There must be power if we are to have true equality. And we must use that power, or it is meaningless.

So, my tips for you this week are quotes from some of my favorite powerhouse women:

1. First, “You are your own power source,” as my friend, Nathalie Molina Niño says in her book every entrepreneur must read, called Leapfrog.
2. Second, “You have a voice, don’t be afraid to use it,” says philanthropist, Melinda Gates. And we know there is power in your voice and power in your words, just as there was transformative power in Hillary Clinton’s words in Beijing 25 years ago.
3. Third, “The most common way people give up power is by thinking they don’t have any.” That’s from writer Alice Walker.
4. And finally, “You had the power all along, my dear,” said Glenda the Good Witch in The Wizard of Oz.

Let me know how it goes for you. You can email me anytime at [powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com](mailto:powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com). I’d love to know how you’re faring. Until next week, Power to You.

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