



**Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Melanne Verveer, Ambassador-at-Large for  
Global Women's Issues  
Madeleine K. Albright Grant Luncheon  
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Thank you so much, Ken. And he just explained why I never get to see any of you. I think it's great that NDI has created this family reunion today, so that we can all come together. And this is such a special part of NDI, one very near and dear to my heart, what NDI is doing for giving women the opportunity they deserve and certainly the lift-up in accessing political power.

I want to thank Ken and everybody associated with NDI for the work that goes on every day to support the democracy builders around the world. And we have been reminded in recent weeks just how difficult that mission is, and NDI is unsurpassed. So, thanks to all of you who make this exceptional work possible. And it is of course my very great honor to be here with that true global trailblazer, Madeleine Albright. I count her as a treasured friend, and one with whom I had the great fortune to work with in the Clinton Administration. You know, it's easy to forget just how long ago the idea of Madame Secretary seemed so far-fetched. Of course, that is no longer the case, and I've been told—I believe it's probably true because children can be so blasé—that Madeleine's granddaughter wondered what was the big deal that her grandmother was the top diplomat. And, she's apparently sad, "After all, only girls can be secretary of state." So we'll have to talk to her sometime about just how hard it is for women, still, to enter the ranks of ministers, and how tough it is for women to hold elective office. It's just about the toughest part of women's rise to full gender equality.

Women are half the world's population, yet hold less than one-fifth of the positions in national governments. They are still significantly outnumbered in the chambers of parliaments and provincial councils, and they are certainly, more often than not, missing from the negotiation tables where conflicts are to be resolved. All too often, important decisions that affect women, their families and their societies are made without their having a voice in the deliberations. And we know that when women are discriminated against in the political arena, their experiences, talents and perspectives are shut out of policy decisions, and our democracies are worse off for it and the prospects for a better world are certainly short-changed.

So that is one of the reasons I am such a huge fan of NDI's [Win With Women Global Initiative](#), which promotes women's political leadership around the world, which I have had the great fortune to work with closely in this position and one to which Madeleine has brought such incredible validation to its work. And I want to salute [Susan Markham](#) for the great job that she is doing at the helm of Win With Women.

Now, 2011 began with women helping to lead the revolutions of the so-called "Arab Spring," and it ended with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to three extraordinary women from Liberia and Yemen who have advanced human rights, peace and democracy and have shown what a difference women can make even in bringing terrible conflicts to a close or rallying for democracy in a significant way.

Now it still remains to be seen what the prospects are going to be for women in Egypt and Libya and Tunisia and Yemen, and I must admit some of the signs have been quite troubling for women's progress. But to ensure that the perspectives and considerations of women are woven into the approach of our own government to confronting critical challenges in the areas of conflict and significant political transitions from Afghanistan to Sudan, from Libya to Nepal. As you know, President Obama launched the first ever U.S. national action plan on women, peace and security. It took us awhile; we have about 30-some countries who preceded us. NATO also got their action plan done, and we finally joined the ranks. And I know it will make a difference because a lot of the countries that have already adopted national action plans are say, "We'd like to come and see how we can improve our own plans." So, it's good to be admitted to those ranks.

And what it does is it sets out a road map for how we will accelerate and institutionalize efforts across government to advance women's participation in preventing conflict and keeping the peace. That is our common cause, and that's why I'm thrilled that NDI is playing a leadership role in advancing women's political participation in all of the arenas.

And one way that is happening is why we are gathered here at lunch today, and that is the Madeleine K. Albright Grant, which supports community-based organizations that create greater roles for women in political and civic life. The winners are selected from a very competitive pool of applicants, and this year, the [Women's Discussion Club of Kyrgyzstan](#) has come out on top.

Kyrgyzstan has made tremendous strides in democracy with the establishment of the first parliamentary republic and the first peaceful, democratic presidential transition that has taken place there. I was in Bishkek just before the elections, several months ago, for a conference that the State Department sponsored for women entrepreneurs from throughout Central Asia. And I remember meeting with President Atambayev, who was involved in this peaceful transference of power, and she is such a dynamic leader and wants to stay engaged in significant ways to keep her country on that democratic road.

But she reminded me, in an earlier visit, that there was a time—and this is true—several years ago, and I hardly remember it, when she was part of a group I was involved in on women’s political participation to share best practices, to share skills, to work together. And she told me, now the president of her country, “I remember what a difference it made in my life and in my career.” So that is why this project that NDI engages in every day is to vitally critical.

And the women’s discussion club was one of the first groups in Kyrgyzstan to bring together women from diverse backgrounds and political parties to defend the rights and interests of women nationwide. And that is not an easy thing to do. The club worked to establish a 30 percent gender quota in the electoral code, resulting in 24 female members of the parliament in 2007 and making Kyrgyzstan a leader in women’s political representation in the region. And in 2010, the club was instrumental in supporting women’s candidates for parliament and organizing citizens around key issues.

We are shortly going to see a brief film of just what the discussion club does, and why its work is so important, why it is getting the grant so it can do even more. And it intends to use its prize money to grow the coalitions and to advocate even more effectively on behalf of women in Kyrgyzstan. And I was able, just before coming in here today, to talk to the leader of the discussion club, and I asked her what this means to her. And it’s true, whenever groups like this can be validated, we underestimate what it represents. The kind of inspiration the club will have growing as it does from this award, and the kind of validation that it represents—that it has achieved this level of recognition—will serve it no end when it continues the hard work it’s doing. They told me that they want to reform the parliamentary election law because today, when a woman steps down, she’s immediately replaced by a man. And they would like to see a woman stepping down being replaced by a woman in a way that is fairer. And to expand the coalition to ensure that the wings of all the political parties throughout the country—women’s wings—can work more closely together on issues that matter to women and to the populations more broadly.

So please look now to the film and then you will hear from the wonderful leader of the Kyrgyzstan Women’s Discussion Club.

Thank you all.