

**University of Connecticut
COMMENCEMENT and ACCEPTANCE SPEECH
FOR HONORARY DEGREE**

**Charlotte Bunch
December 16, 2007**

Thank you President Hogan, Distinguished Faculty, Graduating Students and Parents,

First, let me say what an honour it is for me to be here today and to thank the University for this degree and for recognizing the work on human rights that I have been fortunate to be part of over the years. Also let me congratulate those graduating today as you embark on the next stage in your life's journey.

You are graduating at an important time in the history of this country. Last Monday, December 10th, marked the 59th anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – the landmark document which outlines the basic human rights guaranteed to all people. It also launched the beginning of year long celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the UDHR, led by “The Elders” – a distinguished group including Bishop Tutu and former presidents Nelson Mandela, Mary Robinson, and Jimmy Carter.

With the slogan “Every Human Has Rights,” the campaign is calling for one billion individual signatures to a pledge to live by the principles of the Declaration. The UDHR was drafted in the wake of the atrocities of World War II, but it remains as relevant and urgent today as ever. Creating a culture of respect for human rights is the responsibility not only of governments but of every citizen of every country. It is a particularly heavy responsibility for citizens of powerful countries like the USA. I believe that it should be at the center of our 2008 presidential debates and local elections because it tells us much about the kind of people and nation we strive to be.

Today, I will speak about the importance to our future of human rights in the world and in the USA, including what I have dedicated much of my life to -- the human rights of women.

But first, I want to reflect personally on how a small town girl from New Mexico becomes a “global feminist” who thinks she can make a difference in the world's human rights agenda. My parents raised me to think that I should do something for the greater good, but I wanted to have a life filled with adventure. So I set out to find a way to do both. My decision to become a “professional” political activist emerged from my experiences as an undergraduate student at Duke University in North Carolina during the Black civil rights movement.

Through the Methodist campus ministry, I joined an inter-racial discussion group with students from a nearby Negro college. One day I woke up to a photo in the

newspaper of one of the black students in the group being beaten up by the police in a civil rights demonstration. I was astonished that something like this could happen in the US to another student like me. It was a powerful trigger that shook my world view and prompted me to join a pray-in at the local segregated church that week, and eventually to become part of “the movement” against this injustice.

I don’t want it to seem like an inevitable or easy decision, as I had never imagined doing this. I also knew it would separate me from many other white students at the time and brand me radical or naïve. I certainly had no idea where it would lead me, but I felt instinctively that I had to speak up for my ideals if I ever hoped they would become reality. Over the next few years, I gained an education and even deeper friendships from those I met on this journey. I learned about race and class in the US, which has helped me to understand many other issues of diversity. I met extraordinary activists from around the world: Anti-apartheid crusaders from South Africa, Liberation Theology revolutionaries from Latin America, and Marxist Christians from Eastern Europe. They inspired me with their passion, and helped me to believe that I could make a difference in the world, and indeed that I had a responsibility to try to do so.

Thus, I came to experience the power and exhilaration of being part of a global community working for peace, justice and human rights. Yet, if I had not made that first uncertain step, I might have missed out on what has been one of my life’s most treasured privileges: knowing amazing passionate men and women, including some of the best and bravest men who are not afraid to support women’s rights.

Human rights is about such connections across the many lines that divide us on the surface -- race, class, sexuality, culture, and community – and finding ways to claim our common humanity. These connections sustain us and give our lives richness and meaning. People often ask how I can work on “the problems of the world and not get depressed,” or imply that an activist life is one of “sacrifice.” Certainly working for social justice has its frustrations like any other human enterprise. But I view it as a choice not a sacrifice because it is a very rewarding way to live. As Dr. Zeus would say, “Oh, the places you will go,” and Oh, the people you will meet. The adventures, discoveries, and satisfactions of working with those claiming their humanity and imagining new possibilities in the most unimaginable circumstances are irreplaceable.

When I graduated from college in the 60’s, the US was in the midst of upheavals and heady visions, that made us feel like it was possible to do, or at least try anything, and that a better world was on the horizon. You are inheriting a more troubled and cynical world. Nonetheless, it badly needs people committed to human rights and social change, and I believe that “another, better world is possible,” and that we can respond to these needs with vision today as well.

There are no blueprints for life as a change agent, and each day brings a new situation. Yet, I want to encourage you to live these ideals in whatever path you

take – human rights is not just for professional activists and lawyers. You will not have all the answers, but your education has given you tools to use in seeking them, and the point is to live the questions fully toward those answers. I have found that by continuing to trust my own instincts, yet also always learning from others, I can follow my dreams in a practical way that allows me to shape a life of meaningful – even if not always successful - engagement. Goals are important, but the journey toward them is your life, and both must be shaped to reflect your values.

For me, Human Rights is one of the core values and set of principles that provides a broad framework for living and makes linkages across many issues of social justice. My life journey has been working for a feminist understanding of human rights and seeking to advance the human rights of all women in all our diversity, but this also means respecting all human rights. Ironically just as women’s issues, like violence against women, have finally made it onto the global agenda, human rights in general are increasingly under attack and being questioned.

Some governments and other political forces dismiss rights as only a “Western” construct. Yet, a broad range of countries from all regions crafted the UDHR –to protect people from abuse, and a vast diversity of peoples around the globe have struggled for and contributed to an ever evolving concept of human rights.

The US government today undermines these principles with its considerations of using “torture” and suspending habeas corpus as valid ways to treat prisoners, as well as its doctrine of preemptive strike and its disregard for United Nations treaties and multilateral institutions. These actions not only weaken the enforcement of human rights standards everywhere but also make people in the US more insecure as they feed resentment and legitimize rogue action by others. Americans must challenge abuse and neglect of human rights in our government’s policies, whether in Iraq, Guantanamo, or New Orleans. And we must counter the disrespect for the humanity of non-citizens implicit in much of the domestic discourse about immigration and national security.

The 60th anniversary of the UDHR, and conversations around the US elections in 2008 offer concrete opportunities to re-assert our commitment to human rights principles and to being a country that upholds them. In the drafting of the UDHR in 1948, the US under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, played a vital role in creating a comprehensive set of standards for the world. Sadly this vision of a life of dignity across the globe has been seriously tarnished. Once a beacon of hope, the US is no longer a leading voice for human rights in the world today. But you and I can reclaim that legacy.

On the 10th anniversary of the UDHR in 1958, Eleanor Roosevelt spoke of everyone’s responsibility to build a culture of respect for human rights in all places large and small:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin?” asked Roosevelt. “In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world...the neighborhood, ...school or college, factory, farm, or office....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.”

Each of us can choose to uphold human rights in the everyday spaces of our lives – in our families, communities, and workplaces as well as through our governments – locally to globally. For example, several city councils in the US voted to abide by UN treaties on global warming or women’s rights in local policy, even if the federal government does not.

Around the world, people have sought to make human rights live up to this universal vision by making them more inclusive of all people in all our diversity – of women as well as men, of indigenous peoples and Dalits – the untouchables of South Asia, of the marginalized whether lesbian and gay people, the disabled or the so called gypsies – Roma peoples in Europe. No person’s human rights are secure when any ones can be violated with impunity.

At the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, I was part of the movement of women from across the globe who organized together to demand recognition of “women’s rights as human rights;” we argued that the violence women experience ‘close to home’ is a major human rights crisis. It sounds obvious now, so common sense, but it was revolutionary 20 years ago to see women’s issues as fundamental human rights matters, to declare that the violation of women’s lives is not less important than other violations.

Yet, as late as 1989, Amnesty International – the largest human rights organization in the world – dismissed domestic violence as an unfortunate crime but not a human rights abuse. Fifteen years later, Amnesty launched a major global campaign against violence against women, and the UN has begun to address seriously other issues like rape as a war crime. I am here to tell you that such changes are possible, and you can help make them happen. It is exhilarating to be part of that process -- the activist version of being in the zone!

The UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women has been ratified by all but a dozen countries; shamefully the US is the only industrialized nation still not a party to it. The US has also failed to ratify other key international treaties such as the Child Rights Convention and the Convention on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights....adding to our loss of human rights protections within this country as well as to a loss in our reputation globally.

One of the key challenges for creating a culture of respect for human rights today is the increasing levels of racial, sexual, homophobic and even random violence as well as armed conflicts in the world. This includes high levels of violence against women, which even though it is now condemned publicly, show no discernable signs of declining. Impunity for gender-based violence is almost universal as most perpetrators count upon “getting away with it” —not only legally, but especially in the eyes of the community. The problem of violence against women is not some marginalized, exotic “cultural practice” that takes place somewhere else. It is the culturally embedded practice and assumption of domination over women in virtually all societies, including the US, and the general acceptance of violence as a means of maintaining that control.

There is an important link between gender-based violence and human global security. The UN Human Security Commission report talks about how “violence unseats people’s security.” The fear of violence and lack of control over reproduction creates considerable human insecurity for many women with regard to their bodies. Furthermore, when violence against women in the family is normalized it reinforces cultural acceptance of the violence of war, militarism, and other forms of domination and conflict. Addressing violence at the heart of society, in our families and daily life, is thus a critical part of establishing the conditions for human security for all—an alternative to the nationalist, military-based security approach that is fueling so many conflicts and problems in the world today.

The broader vision of human rights embodied in the UDHR also includes economic and social rights - the right to food, shelter, and education as well as to the civil rights to freedom of speech and religion and freedom from all forms of violence, discrimination and coercion. But in the US, these have often been viewed as lesser human rights, or not even as rights at all. Yet for many, especially women, without access to literacy, land, property, food and housing, the exercise of their civil rights or legal rights are difficult if not impossible to achieve.

With Globalization and the growing trend toward privatization, governments have become even less willing, or sometimes even able, to be accountable for these daily human rights to life of their citizens. In a world where the gap between rich and poor has grown shamefully wider, global poverty and economic rights are increasingly urgent issues, which impinge upon all our lives.

There are many challenges facing human rights, but all of these have been made more urgent by world events in the wake of 9/11. The US and other governments have taken terrorism and legitimate concerns for security as an excuse to close down space for civil society, to narrow the human rights of their citizens, and often to completely deny rights to non-citizens. Yet the greatest threats to people’s everyday security is not terrorism – as terrible as that can be – but violence and poverty. And these also breed the conditions that threaten national security. The 60th anniversary of the UDHR and the national public conversation around the US elections provide an opportunity to return to a broader look at human rights as part

of our basic values, and to take actions large and small that move us toward being the nation we want to be in today's world.

New leadership in the US for human rights, peace, and justice has never been more needed. It will be your generation with your own commitments that must shape the kind of country we will be and the government we will have in the future. The world needs more of us to imagine a world in which human rights for all matter – and to take action to make it happen. I believe that this is possible and it is both idealistic and realistic, as this is the road that will bring us real security and peace in the long run. I hope I will see many of you in the future on this journey.

Thank you.