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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS TO SOKA UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

“You, Equality and Justice”

28 May, 2010

- President Daniel Habuki
- Members of the Board of Trustees
- Faculty
- Graduating seniors
- Parents and family
- SUA supporters
- Dear friends,

Let me begin by thanking the founder, Dr. Ikeda, and Soka University of America sincerely for conferring on me its Award of Highest Honour, reflecting the cardinal principles of this pioneering institution of higher learning. I am truly humbled and deeply appreciative for this great honour which I will always treasure and which will serve as constant reminder that the pursuit of international peace and human rights must always be at the forefront of our endeavours as they are the foundation on which the future of humanity lies.

It is truly a pleasure and an honour to be here with you at this graduation ceremony.

Today, I'm going to focus on gender equality and the attendant empowerment of women. Whether you are female or male, I trust you understand that I am not only speaking about you, your sisters, mothers, aunts and friends, but, indeed, I am speaking about your entire community and beyond. I am speaking

about the entire world which we share with so many wonderful human beings in more than 192 countries and territories.

We are all inextricably linked and interdependent and, once we realize this to be an incontrovertible truth, we also come to the realization that gender equality is actually not a male-female issue; rather, it is a goal for which we must all strive together. When we attain it, not only will individual women benefit, but, more importantly, the entire community, society, country, region and ultimately the entire world will enjoy greater progress. When others around us are happy and fulfilling their potential we all advance. This too is an indisputable truth, so when I speak about improving the lot of women, I am really focused on a better world for all.

This is a very special student body and as proud graduates of SUA, you are, no doubt, all global citizens already keenly aware that yours is a global mission in the true spirit of this wonderful institution that will, in a few minutes, become your alma mater.

I am informed that, comprising today's graduating class are students from Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Japan, Malaysia, Poland, Romania, Thailand, the United States, and Venezuela. I feel as if I am back at the United Nations with so many countries represented!

I have seen the wonderful statue of Mahatma Gandhi here on your campus and I'm certain that you are all familiar with one of his famous sayings, "Be the change you would like to see." How fortunate you are to have studied on a campus surrounded by the likenesses of icons of international stature such as

Socrates, Plato, Ghandi, and Linus Pauling – people who have shown us all that we can be and all to which we should aspire.

I, for my part, have the privilege of working in a career where, to some extent, I can model the very causes that I advocate. I am one of just a handful of female Ambassadors at the United Nations. Although gender equality and women's rights are high on the international agenda, out of the 192 Ambassadors at the United Nations, only 26 of us are women, which is just over thirteen percent. While this may seem like a paltry number and percentage, there are signs of hope and reason for some optimism when one considers the fact that seven years ago when I made my debut on the UN scene, there were only eight female Ambassadors there. It is also noteworthy that for the first time in the history of the UN, 3 of the 15 Member States on the Security Council have female Ambassadors – Brazil, Nigeria and the US – which makes a hefty 20% of that body. These statistics alone are a very telling story of the long and arduous process of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women – and this in the context of the premier international organization in the world where they are, as I said earlier, high on the agenda.

As a female Ambassador at the United Nations, I'll be speaking a little about my own experience, but I hope, in the final analysis, to make the point that gender equality is critical to tackling a huge range of problems and opening the way to the future for all of humanity. Ultimately, it is imperative that we move from gender equality to justice and equity for all.

This is something I learned from a very young age. Growing up, The Bahamas, like many other developing countries, was a place where male dominance went almost unquestioned. Fortunately for me, one person who did question this was

my own father. Our family was poor, but we were rich in terms of progressive ideas about humanity and our place in the world.

My father, who started out as a carpenter, went on to study mortuary sciences and finally established his business at a time when there was only a handful of other professionals in that field. He was a man ahead of his time in many ways, one manifestation of which was his insistence that his daughters receive the best education possible. It wasn't that he favored his daughters, but that he understood fully that society would favor his sons, by sheer dint of their gender. As he put it, "a man can always make his way in the world, but a woman needs a good education." And so it was that my parents put everything into educating their four daughters who were sent abroad to private schools for this purpose.

I felt special because I knew that I was being afforded a special and unusual opportunity, not only from the perspective of my family, but also from the perspective of the larger Bahamian society. I have always been deeply grateful for the many sacrifices that my parents bore to make this possible. For their part, they always made it clear that much is expected of those to whom much is given and that I would be expected to be a contributive member of society.

I am standing before you here today largely because of the education and training that I received. It has always meant much more to me than just a set of initials to put next to my name or a framed diploma to hang on my wall. Education gave me confidence and, just as my father predicted, it was my path to a challenging and exciting life and career with an ever luminous future.

This bastion of learning that is SUA exists to provide education, not just for its own sake, but for securing the things for which all people long and hold dear –

peace, equality, justice, security and freedom from want. As the founder of SUA, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, has succinctly stated, “Education deepens us and enables us to build a better society and a brighter future.”

At the United Nations, we have done innumerable studies on the impact of education and study after study has shown that the best possible investment is not in tech stocks or real estate – the best possible investment, hands down, is in the education of children. In order to be complete and effective, however, education, at whatever level, must be equally accessible and available to females and males.

On every single social indicator, we know that a modest investment in girls’ education brings huge returns, improving health, nutrition, productivity and economic growth. And the best part is that these gains are carried forward for generations, because when you invest in a woman, you invest in her and her children. A study by the Council on Foreign Relations has found that, in developing countries, for every year of elementary school completed by a girl, she can later increase her wages by up to twenty percent. For years of high school completed, that figure jumps to twenty-five per cent. In today’s world, nine million children die each year before they reach age five, but for each extra year of education a mother receives, the risk for her children is diminished by as much as ten per cent. I have seen this play out in numerous countries around the world.

A few years ago, I travelled to Liberia as part of a UNICEF delegation. The country had been devastated by fourteen years of brutal civil war, but there were signs of hope, evidenced most poignantly by the resilience and determination of the people. Importantly, there were literally signs on the

streets bearing the slogan, “Educate a girl and you educate a nation.” Liberia was clearly off to a new and promising start. The proof was right there in the office of the President, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – the first woman ever to be elected to lead an African country. A number of key Liberian Ministries were also headed by women at that time.

In an effort to encourage even more progress on gender equality in that country, the United Nations fielded an all-female police battalion as part of the UN security operations there. Those policewomen, while helping to stabilize neighborhoods and protect civilians, also inspired their Liberian sisters to seek to do likewise and sure enough, after seeing these proud female UN police, Liberian women began enrolling in the police academy. The benefits of this development will, no doubt, redound not only to the new recruits, but to the society as a whole. These women are now empowered, not because they are police, but because they are trained and employed and can provide for themselves and their families, while simultaneously providing an indispensable and important service to their communities.

This is reflective of the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. Resolution 1325 is considered a potential game-changer because it places women front and centre as key and indispensable agents in the prevention and settlement of conflicts, as well as in the pursuit and maintenance of peace. The resolution also recognizes that women and children are most adversely affected by armed conflict and underscores the imperative of protecting and ensuring the human rights of women and girls in those situations. This resolution was adopted ten years ago in the year 2000 and here we are in 2010 marking the tenth anniversary of a momentous occasion when, at the international level, we outlined and laid the

foundation for focused and concerted action on some fundamental truths for the sake of all humanity.

There is overwhelming evidence that the closer countries move toward gender equality, the easier it is to promote peace and development, a matter of which the international community is keenly aware. That is why, also in the year 2000, leaders from around the world came to the United Nations and adopted the Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight targets to be achieved by 2015, with the objective of setting developing countries on the path to sustained economic growth and sustainable development. It should come as no surprise to learn that one of the Goals is gender equality and it is interesting to note that another three of those Goals – universal education, child health, and maternal health – have a direct bearing on gender equality.

In September of this year, Heads of State and Government will once again convene at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to assess progress toward the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and to map out a winning strategy for the final five years leading up to 2015. In preparation for this meeting the Secretary-General of the UN recently issued an assessment of achievements, to date, which, not surprisingly, indicates that we do in fact possess the knowledge and resources to achieve these goals and that with the appropriate commitment, policies, effort, and international support it can be done even in the poorest countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, there have been notable improvements in child health and primary school enrollment over the past two decades, because there has been the political will, backed by global partnerships, to make it so. Make no mistake about it, global partnerships are fundamental to success and they have their rudimentary

beginnings in and are anchored at the local level where individuals act and interact.

The international community, it would appear, is beginning to catch up with the wisdom of people like my father from generations past who understood that women have the power to sustain their families, whole nations and our world. It is an inescapable fact that the world's development and prosperity depends on the development and empowerment of fully one half of humanity – women. When it comes to the advancement of women, economic empowerment is perhaps the most important strategy. So while a modicum of education is absolutely necessary, it is not always sufficient.

Once again, I have seen this in my own family. My mother never had the opportunity to attend University, but she had always been an excellent student. After she got married, she spent the next twenty-six years as a housewife in the classic sense of the word. But then my father died in a tragic accident. At the time, my siblings and I were all at various stages of our education, all at great cost. My mother had never worked outside the home during her marriage, but she picked up the reins of my father's business and took it to new heights of success and prosperity.

It was a courageous move – and it paid off. The business went from strength to strength. In 1975, my mother was named "Business Woman of the Year" and two decades later she was named "Business Person of the Year". She was now recognized, not only as an outstanding woman, but as an outstanding person. In 1993 the business celebrated 50 years of uninterrupted operation by the same family. This was a significant accomplishment in the history of Black-owned

businesses in The Bahamas. My mother was there at the helm. She had given her all and had won against seemingly insurmountable odds.

My mother's experience is one of countless examples of the vast potential of women as representatives of their own gender and society at large. So much of this potential goes untapped and unexpressed, because women and girls lack opportunities. My dear mother passed away just five weeks ago at the ripe and impressive age of ninety-two, having lived a full, productive and challenging life. In the span of her lifetime, from the most humble of beginnings, she became a global citizen travelling the world and establishing herself as a pillar and icon of Bahamian society.

I tell you these stories about my family only because I want you to leave here fully convinced that absolutely nothing is impossible and you have within you the means to accomplish your every dream and goal. Heroines and heroes walk among us and it is ordinary people just like you and me who are accomplishing extraordinary feats and making the impossible possible.

Since my mother's heyday, The Bahamas has taken a number of proactive measures to promote gender equality and the advancement of women and, since the advent of universal suffrage in The Bahamas in 1962, prior to Independence which came in 1973, and up to the present day, Bahamian women have consistently outnumbered their male counterparts in exercising their right to vote. Women in The Bahamas have also carried this enthusiasm for exercising their political rights into elective office. In its short history as an independent nation, The Bahamas has boasted its first female Governor General and its first female Deputy Prime Minister. Women also account for the overwhelming majority of top executive positions in Government agencies, and have reached

the highest levels of the judicial system where they account for 45% of the Justices and where we have seen the appointment of the first female Chief Justice, who subsequently became President of the Court of Appeal. For my part, I am deeply honoured to serve as the first female Ambassador and Permanent Representative of The Bahamas to the United Nations.

While some countries, such as The Bahamas, have made notable progress, we must not allow ourselves to be diverted from the still-urgent task of full gender equality, particularly when we acknowledge its critical and inextricable link to development. The message that gender equality is itself a development strategy is not always heard and so it must be said more clearly and loudly, and as often as possible. Worse still, we sometimes see signs of a backlash, and ‘fatigue’ with respect to this cause. The tough and sad fact is that there are seriously daunting obstacles, in the vast majority of developing countries, blocking the empowerment of women.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948; the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action which was adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995; Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Millennium Development Goals, both of which I noted earlier and were adopted in 2000 – all of these instruments have played important and crucial roles in directing the gaze of society at inherent inequalities and the need to work toward their elimination. Fundamentally, in many societies, this means working to change deeply ingrained norms, mores, and habits at the national and local levels and to spur and undergird those changes with legislation that is enforced rigorously. Since we all live, work and interact at the local and national levels that goal is ours to achieve, for these are the levels at which lasting change must be implemented in

order to make a difference in the lives of individual women as members of society and as citizens of nations.

In addition, there remain persistent and pervasive inequalities within the international economic system as well, which complicate the efforts of some countries, particularly developing countries, to design and fully implement gender-sensitive development strategies. Lack of access to trade and markets for developing countries, crippling debt burdens, equally crippling structural adjustment programmes and other mechanisms, as well as the exclusion of developing countries from international economic decision-making processes, makes it more difficult for some countries to fully realize their chosen development strategies. The impact of an uneven and unbalanced globalization, whose negative social and economic consequences generally fall disproportionately on developing countries, can also have the effect of distorting development strategies, including those predicated on gender equality. A level playing field would go a long way toward helping developing countries achieve the kind of economic prosperity and sustainable development that will allow them to put in place more egalitarian measures for women.

A similar stultifying effect can result from natural and other disasters, such as the tsunami that hit Asia in December of 2004, and the hurricanes of 2005 that devastated a number of Caribbean countries, including my own, not to mention the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti earlier this year. These events can undermine decades of development and cause grave setbacks in development processes, to the detriment of entire populations, and the impact on women is always especially severe.

My dear graduating seniors, when you go out into the professional world, you will face many challenges, including that of finding your place. But wherever you are and whatever you do, you can learn and you can contribute. You can help to build a better future for humankind within any setting, because the ripple effect works in all contexts and I hope that you will be ever mindful of the need to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women not simply for its own sake, but because it will make our world a better place in which to live for all

No doubt, you will branch out into many fields of endeavour, but one thing is for sure and that is that you will all have the opportunity to share your knowledge with others in one way or another. Regardless of the field you enter, there will be a part you can play to promote support for gender equality and the empowerment of women, whether it is in corporate America, the international field, non-governmental organizations, academia, or government. I hope I have given you a glimpse into why this is important for those who are oppressed as well as for those who lead seemingly free lives. For as Martin Luther King Jr. has correctly stated, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”. From the trenches and sidewalks of the neighbourhood to the corridors of power, you will influence people around you, and our world. And if you take a summer job as a lifeguard you can still make a difference. Every contribution counts no matter how large or small, but you must, first of all, be aware and be determined.

Starting today, each of you has the treasure of a degree from this magnificent Soka University of America. The founder, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, whom I quoted previously, has also called on youth to, “Live in a way that is full of life – for yourself, for your loved ones, for your friends. People who do so will find the

courage to transform sufferings into hopes. Not only that, but they will be able to light the lamp of hope in the hearts of many others as well.”

By the way, I have a daughter who is also in the class of 2010 as a high school, graduate. I will confess to you that my interactions with her have helped me develop my best negotiating skills. I am a much better diplomat, thanks to the hours we've spent bargaining over her curfew, her allowances, and her computer and television time. Such is the life of a diplomat mother – no different from that of other mothers of teenagers. Sometimes I think it is easier to hammer out a peace agreement between warring countries than to get an agreement in the family.

But that is precisely the point – you do not have to be a diplomat or even work in the field of international relations to create peace and understanding. You can begin with your most immediate environment – your families – and you can take that experience and expand it ever outwards to encompass your work environment, your circle of friends, your community, your society, your country, your world.

Dear graduating seniors, one of the people whose life I most admire is Harriet Tubman. Here is a woman who, born into slavery, was completely powerless, but she knew what was right, and she struggled for her freedom against impossible odds. She finally made it to freedom, thanks to the “Underground Railroad”. Had she so decided, she would have been forgiven for resting after this long and extremely dangerous journey, but within a year she returned to the South to free others who were still suffering under the brutal and invidious system of slavery. Yet again, she did not stop there, but returned again, and again, and again – some nineteen times in total, helping to free some 300

people. It is incredible to imagine the effect of freeing even one person, helping even one individual to escape from bondage and experience the freedom to which she or he is entitled as a human being and to explore the full potential of her or his life. Multiply this hundreds of times over and the value created is immeasurably boundless. Ms. Tubman was a champion!

I want to leave you with the words of this great abolitionist, Harriet Tubman, who went from the powerlessness and oppression of slavery to the influence and immortality of holding a shining place in history. She said, "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world."

Dear graduates of the wonderful class of 2010, you must do all you can to make the path to equality and justice open and accessible to all. You are the dreamers who can, with strength, patience and passion, change the world. I wish you all a stupendous future spent reaching for the stars. They are closer than we think.

Thank you.