

Mrs Mary Robinson Keynote Address
MELF Virtual Graduation, 20 February 2021

“Thank you for that very kind introduction and good morning, good afternoon and good evening. I am honoured to speak at the first graduation of the nine Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders Fellows. I am also very happy that the MELF community - I have done my homework - that the MELF community as a whole, is able to take part virtually including the families of these nine wonderful graduates. I’ve read their profiles and I’m most impressed and also inspired by what each of you has achieved already in your young lives, and in particular, your commitment to the values of justice and mercy. It is clear that each of you has a strong sense of justice, and that you understand the quality of mercy as spoken about by Portia in the ‘Merchant of Venice’. It’s one of my favourite passages of Shakespeare’s, so I’d just like to quote the beginning of it again. I’m sure you’re all very familiar with it.

‘The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.’

Of course, this time it is she and you who are blessed. Indeed, I know that you will want to thank your parents and your families for helping you to become successful candidates for this important fellowship.

I’d like to commend Mercy International for this initiative of an Emerging Leaders Fellowship to help extend women’s sphere of influence in our world. This is incredibly important but such funded fellowships are all too rare. It’s clearly a very well thought out fellowship. It acknowledges the importance, for example, of mentorship, how many young women I’ve met who want to be mentored, who want that kind of support and that’s built into the program.

Investment in the education, empowerment and encouragement of women and girls is the best investment in the world. I repeat that, the best investment in the world. But only now been recognised, and still gravely under funded. We are making links now between empowering women and girls and development of communities but it is so much more than that. We need to understand that women’s leadership in our world really matters. Why does it matter? Because women tend to lead differently, to be more problem solving, to be more collaborative, to be less hierarchical, and more or less, to be more listening. We see this even in this COVID era. It is women leaders who have done better, by and large, in leading their countries. We see New Zealand as a star example, but also Taiwan, close to China, the leaders in Europe, Angela Merkel, the Prime Ministers of Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland. They have all taken tough decisions and brought their people with them. It has been important to highlight this women’s leadership at this particular time.

I think it is important that we recognise that among women leaders when they come together, there is a high level of trust. That is something that I have become very conscious of in recent years and never more so than now. I am involved in a number of women leaders networks that are working on different issues. What is extraordinary is the level of trust between women leaders. It is very precious and very rare to have that level of trust, because we know we are coming together to problem solve, to work collaboratively, to listen to each

other. Just in the last couple of years, I've become a member of Fearless Women, which is largely business women linked with the B team of business leaders. Dangerous Women, which is women that Pat Mitchell is largely focused on. Connected Women, again, involving Pat Mitchell and a lot of media women. And more recently, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and myself have established a womens leaders network of women from Africa and Europe, Europe and Africa, to focus on the work of an Africa Europe Foundation and an Africa Europe Climate Alliance. I will come back to the climate issue a little later.

Let me just very briefly speak to my own journey because I think that it is often good to hear the motivation of somebody in their life. I too, like your nine fellows, had a really strong inner sense of justice and when I studied Law in Trinity in Dublin, I studied it as a means of bringing about social change and social justice. I was lucky enough to graduate from the law school in Harvard in 1968, which meant I was there during that year of 1967 to 1968. See what an elder I am! It was an extraordinary year. It was the year when my American contemporaries were questioning what they called an immoral war, the war in Vietnam. They were trying to avoid the draft. In April, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and just after I graduated, Robert Kennedy was assassinated. But what I took from that year and what I remembered was that young people were taking responsibility. They were going into the civil rights movement and the poverty movement in the south of the United States. My friends. They weren't going into Wall Street firms. They actually had that burning desire for change.

I came back to Ireland with what my husband-to-be Nick called, with some humour, he called it my Harvard humility. It meant that I had somehow the nerve or the courage, whatever you want to call it, the following year, to challenge that it was male professors who stood for the election to the six seats in our Irish Senate. And I said why wouldn't it be a woman or a younger person. I was supported and got elected at the age of twenty five and was able to play a part.

This is what affects your life's chances.

I was very active as a lawyer taking cases particularly on equality issues, and not only in the Irish courts, but luckily, we were also able to take cases in the courts of human rights in Strasbourg and the court of the European Union when we joined in Luxembourg. When I became President I had to learn another way of trying to communicate values. As a non-Executive President, I had to work on moral leadership which is very difficult, you have to live it very seriously everyday. You have to reach out to those who are marginalised within Ireland visiting groups but also, go to places like Somalia and Rwanda and try to play a role in human rights. Since then, I had the challenge of being the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights which was a very big challenge at getting leadership in human rights from a rather small office of the UN. I learned that the way to do it was to go to the places of the worst violations of human rights and very often, that involved women of course, and listen. That was the only power I had. The power to listen and then help to bring those stories back, help to get those stories out, so that action would be taken and justice would begin to be brought. Of course, it doesn't happen nearly enough.

Funnily enough and I often admit this, I didn't make the connection when I was High Commissioner between climate change and human rights. There was another part of the UN dealing with climate and I was in my big silo of human rights, women's rights, rights of

people with disabilities, but I didn't make the connection. It was afterwards, working in African countries on the economic and social rights that matter so much if you don't have them, rights to food, water, health, education. I kept hearing that things were so much worse. And I learned that there were so many layers of injustice of climate change. The way I speak about it is climate justice. I now either speak about it as climate justice or the climate crisis but I don't talk really about climate change. What are the layers of injustice that mean we have to have a climate justice approach? I want to say this in particular to the nine wonderful fellows, because I want allies in promoting climate justice at all levels. I will very briefly go through those five layers:

The first is that climate change, as I learned in African countries from 2003/4 to 2010, was affecting the poorest countries and the poorest communities, and small island states, disproportionately, much earlier, very unfairly, and they weren't responsible. When you think about it, these are the black, brown, and indigenous peoples in our world. And COVID has shown us that it is the black, brown and indigenous people who get affected first and worst for a variety of reasons that we have come to understand.

The second injustice is the gender dimensions within that. Women are much more affected by the impact of the climate crisis because they have less rights in many cases, they have less access to capital, they are not trained as agricultural workers the same as men tend to be trained, and so on. Yet, they have to put food on the table and have to go further in the drought for water. I learned so much from listening to women. I wrote that book on Climate Justice. There are eleven stories in the book, nine of them are about women but of course, there are also two good men. That was a big learning curve about the gendered dimensions.

Then, the children all around the world have reminded us of the intergenerational injustice. They speak truth to power. They call us out for our failure to be on track for a safe world for them, and for their children and grandchildren. And they are absolutely right to do it.

The next injustice is a subtle injustice but very important, the injustice of the pathways to development of industrialised countries like Ireland, European countries, the United States, Korea, Japan etc., and developing countries. We built our economies on fossil fuel and now we have the responsibility to wean ourselves off rapidly. Developing countries, before the Paris Agreement, and I was the Special Envoy of the Secretary General at that time, promised that they would also go as green as possible. But they said we will need the investment, we will need the skills, we will need the training to do it. And we have not shown enough solidarity. Meanwhile, many developing countries including in Africa, have found more coal, more oil, more gas - they have to take their people out of poverty, what are they to do? - and the terrible injustice is if they go the dirty route, their people will suffer first and worst because that is the way it is. Everybody will suffer because it will use up the carbon budget and we won't have a safe world. So, it is in our absolute interests to provide that investment, share the technology and the knowledge and help developing countries go as clean and green as possible with the jobs that go with that.

The fifth injustice is the injustice to nature herself. The report in May 2019 of the UN said a huge loss of biodiversity and even extinction of up to a million species. We are learning that we have to combine our work on reducing emissions, to have a safe world for climate, with increasing our biodiversity again, by a conference which will take place in China this year, a

Convention on Biodiversity. There's a huge movement to protect thirty percent of the land and thirty percent of the oceans. So, we have to combine these two and not have them in silos separately but actually work for both.

I will finish on this point with some final words which will be, you will be glad to hear, hopeful. I think COVID has helped us. I often say I am more hopeful now than I was in January 2020, the year we were supposed to have the great conference on climate in Glasgow and I couldn't see the ambition at that stage. Then, COVID hit worldwide and of course, you wouldn't wish it on the world, but it has put everybody out of their comfort zone. It has broken a failed system more visibly. We see it wasn't working and COVID has exacerbated all of the inequalities, racial inequality, gender inequality, poverty inequality, inequality for people with disabilities etc., marginalised people. It has brought out the intersectionality between those inequalities. I'm sure you fellows will know that's a great feminist term, intersectionality, and we need it to get out of all of our silos, so that those who work for Black Lives Matter will also work for Climate Justice, will also work for Me Too issues, will work for violence against women, and then we can somehow seamlessly connect these movements in a more global sense.

Another lesson from COVID is that government matters. There has been a tendency to try to hollow out government at the free market that will save us all. No. Government matters, we need government regulations. And science matters. That is what children are saying to us, "don't listen to us we are just children. Listen to the science". And we are listening to the science, we are listening to the health experts. They are side-by-side with the government determining when we might come out of lockdown, in what phases etc. etc. We need to listen to the climate scientists in just the same way.

We need to understand another lesson of COVID is that collective behaviour matters. It is what is keeping us from the virus at the moment, as we await the roll out of vaccines. And we need equitable access to those vaccines, and I am glad to see the G7 recognised that yesterday and it is beginning to be more focused on. Nobody will be safe until we are all safe. That's a lesson about humanity. COVID has taught us how fragile our global humanity is. We need to work in ways that strengthen the humanity of our humanity and therefore, my guidance on how we recover is that we don't use the language that I hear even from the UN and from President Biden, that we should 'build back better'. I don't want to build back. I want to build forward, with equality, with fairness, with human security, with justice, with human rights, and learn that this is the way that we should go forward. That's what the Elders are trying to do that I am now Chair of. I learned a wonderful lesson from Archbishop Tutu, the first Chair of the Elders, who when he was accused of being an optimist because he was speaking to an audience of young people and he told them how much he loved them and how wonderful they were. We were being moderated by a journalist who turned rather sharply to him and said 'Archbishop Tutu why are you such an optimist?'. He shook his head and said 'no, I am not an optimist, I am a prisoner of hope'. That is a really, really important point, to be hopeful. To be a prisoner of hope, as he described it. Because if we are hopeful in a situation, then we have the energy to makedo, maybe the glass isn't half full, but there is something in that glass and we build on it. I've seen the profiles. All of you are building on quite difficult situations that you have found in the communities that you are working in but you have the optimism of hope in that sense. You could talk about climate, for example, or nuclear energy in a way that frightens people so much that they just put their head down and

say 'this doesn't concern me, I can't cope with that, I will just go on with my life'. We want to encourage people to take the steps, and to actually make the climate crisis personal in their lives, and to know that they are doing it by changing their behaviour in some way. And also getting angry with people who don't do enough, and thirdly, imagining this world that we need to be hurrying towards.

We all have to have hope, as well as justice and mercy. I wish our nine wonderful graduates that they continue in their lives paths more encouraged, more inspired, because they have understood that the quality of mercy is very blessed.

Thank you all and good wishes to Mercy International."

***Note, this is a transcript of the Graduation recording as delivered orally by Mrs Mary Robinson.**