



25 YEARS AFTER BEIJING: CLAIMING A SEAT AT THE TABLE

WRITTEN BY:

HERlead Fellow Marley Duchovnay

I remember the first time I heard Hillary Rodham Clinton proclaim, “Women’s rights are human rights.” I was fifteen years old, in one of the many desks in my 9th-grade social studies classroom. It struck me at the moment just how important that statement was. The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action set a standard on the international stage about how crucial the safety and success of women and girls are. It demanded that the inclusion of women be treated as a requirement, rather than an added benefit. Years later, at twenty-three, the goals set forth still feel as urgent.

My passion for politics developed at a young age. Growing up with three generations of women under my roof, one of whom was a Holocaust survivor, I always believed that women held immeasurable strength and felt an obligation to take action in my community. To me, it always felt natural to view women as perfectly suited to take up positions of leadership.

I believe that women carry nations. We lead teams; we care for our families and neighbors, and we create innovative solutions. In the United States in particular, women comprise 50.4% of the employed workforce ([Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)) and worldwide we represent 49.6% of the population ([The World Bank](#)). Even more importantly, just like all citizens, we have a stake in the future of our communities, environment, economy, and the health of our democracy.

As a young girl, it surprised me to see only a few prominent examples of women in elected office and shocked me even further to hear that oftentimes people did not identify women as a clear choice for leadership positions. In recent years in the United States, we have seen a huge increase in women, both Democrats and Republicans, claiming a seat at the table in elected office, up and down the ballot. Women hold 126 seats in Congress (23.6% of all seats), 91 Statewide Executive offices (29.3% of all available positions), and 2,132 of seats in State Legislatures (28.9% of all seats) ([Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics](#)).

Today, running for office—and winning—feels like much more of a real possibility to young girls and women across the country. In recent years, we’ve seen it happen! Looking back to that moment in Beijing in 1995, it is so clear how much progress women have made in claiming roles in leadership and decision-making. But it is equally clear how much there still is to do.

When we speak of ensuring female representation in our governing bodies—we need to make sure that we mean *all* women. We need the leadership, perspectives, and interests of women of color to be represented in elected offices from the local level to the federal level. Currently, women of color hold 47 seats in Congress (8.8% of all available seats), 17 Statewide Executive offices (4.5% of all positions), and 538 of



seats in State Legislatures (7.3% of all seats) ([Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics](#)). We can and need to do better in demanding increased representation.

With every step towards gender parity in our government that we take, I am so grateful for the work of the countless women before us who have made it possible. As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, I hope that we can take a moment to reimagine the future possibilities for women in politics. As Melinda Gates recently said, “As we come out of this crisis and we’re rebuilding, that’s the time to make sure we have diverse voices at the table so we can design the future we want”.