Perdita Huston Human Rights Award
UNA-NCA

December 10, 2015--The Rayburn Building--Washington, DC

Thank you Nora [Dudwick] for your gracious and ethnographic introduction and for the many years of your friendship and inspiration.

It is a great honor to receive this award this evening. And thank you for the opportunity to say a few words about why gender equality matters to sustainable peace.

But may I first begin by saying how impressed I am with UNA-NCA’s work in this community at large. I want to give a special note of appreciation to the team Paula, Kristen, Heather, and Karen in making this award evening possible, and to Ambassador Bliss for your leadership. And to my fellow awardees, Mark and Wes, and Martha’s Table, I want to congratulate you on your work as it shines a light on what is possible. You are an inspiration to me and to all of us here this evening.

Because a recognition like this is really about teamwork, I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the many who make a difference in my life every day--an amazing team of family, friends, and colleagues. And so I thank my children for your dear support, and to my extended family here from Texas...And to thank my terrific colleagues at USIP and the US Civil Society Working Group, who are very much my partners in this award.
The UNA-NCA established the Perdita Huston Human Rights Award to honor Huston’s enduring commitment to improving the status of women. So sharing this Award with the global heavy weights of the likes of Zainab Salbi, Sanam Anderlini and others...is truly an unprecedented honor for me.

I think Perdita would be especially pleased this evening to know that her granddaughter Eliza Paynel is joining us here as she begins her freshman year at American University. [To Eliza] As I have come to learn more about your grandmother, I have been particularly taken with the fact that Perdita was the first recipient of the Margaret Mead World Citizen Award. I love the concept of being a world citizen! Indeed these two world citizens, Perdita, a journalist activist, and Margaret, an activist anthropologist, had a great deal in common when it came to bringing the issues of the voiceless to those in positions of power here in Washington and around the world.

As an anthropologist working in the peacebuilding field, it is particularly gratifying to be celebrating tonight all those world citizens who daily work tirelessly to bring light and hope to some of humanity’s darkest spaces.

Among the human rights advocates are many who are particularly dedicated to women’s rights. And in that light, I am often asked what exactly is a “senior gender advisor”, and “what do you do?” In the same way I might explain my work to my own children, if you will, I like to think that I work every day to help make the invisible visible.
That is to say --

I am involved in the work of reframing gender in the peace and security sectors.

Gender is an invisible yet organizing force in all of our lives. We accept it without question. And yet, when we do question the norms, rules and social values around gender dynamics, we come to recognize the power of these behaviors, and know that such questioning usually rocks the boat in our society, whether that is a family, community, institution or government. We also know that is not another name for only women. We know that to actually change the gender equation, we need to men engaged in challenging their own narrowly defined gender roles as well. We see this particularly in conflict-affected countries where “hyper masculinity” norms for men based on violence has a devastating impact on women and girls, and is difficult for men to challenge such norms.

Tonight however we are focused on women, peace and security. No matter which stakeholder group we represent -- whether we are from civil society, government, academia or the military – we see the progress as a larger community in making the invisible visible!

Let me give you a few examples from this week:

Today marks International Human Rights Day. It is also the final day of a global civil society effort called the 16 Days of Activism
to end violence against women. Each of these 16 days has had a theme to make sure we are aware of the possibilities to change the trend line. This is an example of making the invisible visible!

In the academic world, just this week the Pakistani government has approved the inclusion of a chapter in school children’s textbooks that focus on the protection of women from violence. This is about making the invisible visible!

And on this upcoming Saturday in a country where women are not allowed to drive a car, the women of Saudi Arabia will be allowed for the first time ever to vote and run for office in this historic municipal elections. This is about making the invisible visible!

And finally -- noting the fourth stakeholder group, the military, just seven days ago, the US Secretary of Defense announced that all jobs in the military, including ground level combat roles, will now be open to women. Although women have long been in combat, their visibility is now recognized, will be rewarded, and will be able to be promoted to the highest offices of the US military. This is about making the invisible visible!

Challenges remain, big challenges, like how to bring women into the visible realm of all phases of peace processes—not as marginal players, but as central to the operational intricacies of ending violent conflict—especially because over the last two decades, women make up only about 2% of the signatories on the treaties.
No doubt rewriting gender equality into peace and security institutions will take a long time. Yet I am enormously heartened by the new Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #5 on Gender Equality, as exemplified by Swedish Foreign Minister’s Margot Wallstrom’s Feminist Foreign Policy released last month that states the “Equality between women and men is a fundamental aim of Swedish foreign policy. Ensuring that women and girls can enjoy their fundamental human rights is both a duty within the framework of our international commitments, and a prerequisite for Sweden’s broader foreign policy goals on development, democracy, peace and security.”

And so in conclusion, I want to express again my deep appreciation to the UNA NCA organizers, and to say that I accept the Perdita Huston Human Rights award on behalf of the many throughout the world who work daily behind the scenes; those who work in conflict-affected societies; and those who are often at great peril out in front and leading--- to continue our efforts to ensure that women are a critical part of the solution when it comes to ending violence on this planet.

Thank you!