

**TRANSCRIPT:
OPENING SPEECH BY CHERIE BLAIR
AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH AND 1ST ANNUAL MEETING OF CGDC
05-21-2011**

Well, good morning everybody and first of all can I say, thank you for that wonderful introduction! I have heard about the charm of the Austrian men and I see it personified in that very flattering if possibly not entirely true introduction. Can I say how delighted I am to be here today just to support my good friend President Stoyanov – who of course I knew when my husband was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom – in this wonderful initiative the Centre for Global Dialogue and Cooperation, and particularly to welcome him making his first meeting here to highlight the both strengths and the challenges of the Western Balkans region. I need to begin also with an apology because though my dear friend Bill Clinton will be here this evening and sadly, I would not. I have just come literally this morning from Astana in Kazakhstan and yesterday it was my youngest child Leo's 11th birthday. So you will forgive me if I am staying for the morning but then I am going to take the BA flight back home to be with my boy actually my two boys, 'cause my husband will be there, too. [Laughter/ Applause]

But it was a coincidence in fact that I was in Astana because I was attending the EBRD Annual General Meeting there and the EBRD of course is no stranger here in Austria. There were many Austrian bankers there that I have met or indeed, in this region of Western Balkans. A many of the issues that we discussed of the two days of the Annual General Meeting are reflected in the discussions that you have highlighted already Petar which, I know, will touch on today.

Now, you mentioned in your speech that we should be leveraging assets. I absolutely agree with that and one of the main assets in any country in the world, of course, is the female half of the population. And so, in Astana I was talking about the role of women in business and what was interesting in that country which came out of the Soviet Union and whose history of obviously was very much affected by the history that you were talking about that affected the countries in the Western Balkans, too, was when people talked about the trauma after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the struggle to rebuild their society in Kazakhstan not just in the economy, but in the wider society, they pointed out the crucial role that women had played in that progress. Often women going out and setting up small businesses after their men had found themselves unemployed because of the collapse of the system. And this pattern of women picking up the pieces after seismic change I have seen for myself all over the world in Africa, in Asia, and not least in the Balkans.

In the late 1990s, of course, I visited the region with my husband at a time of the conflict in Kosovo and I still remember and I will remember till my dying day going to Macedonia and visiting the border and seeing the lines of refugees with their few belongings queuing up to escape to the safety of that country. And I thought to myself – I was born in the 1950s I have

read about this happening in Europe, in books and seeing it in films, heard my parents talk about it but I never imagined that we would see such a thing again in my continent. And yet, last year I went again to Kosovo with my husband to celebrate the 10th anniversary and I saw some amazing sides. I am not just referring to the 10 little boys called “Tony Blair” that came on to the platform when we were there all the people calling out Tony’s name but I also remember meeting a group of war widows who I met and who told me how by sheer determination and hard work they come together to pick up the pieces of their village which would be in decimated of its men and started to turn their skills in making traditional pickles, which was so popular in their country into a business. They set up a money making enterprise and now they are wanting to expand their factory in order to bring more jobs to that village. They told me heart rending tales of their experiences in the conflict but they also told me of their pride of what they had achieved in rebuilding their lives and their hopes of expansion and for the better future for their whole community.

And at the same time on that visit I went to Albania and again I met women in the city – women who are doing amazing work not just in traditional female occupations but running a media company, running factories and professional services. I have no doubt that this region has many determined and capable women and I am delighted to see the Deputy Prime Minister a female no less from Kosovo here today. [Applause]

Now today, in all the literature and all the discussions it is widely recognized that involving women in sustainable economic development and utilizing their untapped potential is vital for economic growth and development. And yet, and it is a big but – despite that overwhelming economic case in many countries across the world women are largely overlooked in the talent pool for creating growth and as a result the often treated as unequal partners in political, social and economic decision making. It is women who bear the brunt of poverty in the world. Of the 1.2 billion people across the world who live in abject poverty 70 % of female and despite the proven evidence that we have seen now again and again in surveys that women are reliable payers only 10 % of global credit is extended to women. Its women who find themselves in so many places denied in education or the right to own land, or a voice in the community simply because of their gender. And as we recognize in all societies such prejudice is not just damaging to the individuals themselves but the well-being of their families the strength of their countries’ economy and the health of society at large. Because after all in the 21st century the most important row material for companies and for countries alike is not as in the past coal or iron or even with reference to Oman oil itself, but human capital and this means that those who deliberately ignore the potential of half the population are doomed to be left behind.

This pattern of failing to accord women equal participation in all aspects of life is found throughout the world. There is no country in the world where women have achieved total equality with man based on the criteria that the World Economic Forum concentrates on its annual gender gap report: They look at discrimination access to education, in health, in economic participation and in political participation. No country has achieved full equality. Though it has to be said that year and year out it is the Scandinavian countries that dominate

the top three in fact the top five group. The UK is currently around 16th place on the list. And the Western Balkans well, sadly well down the league tables. And indeed there is some evidence that discrimination against female workers in the region is rising so that they feel worse off than they were in the pre- 1990s regimes. In Macedonia, for example, women hold only 10 % of Ministerial positions and have a low representation in Parliament and other leadership roles despite the fact that they are all well educated. In Croatia women are paid significantly less than men for similar work even that there is a greater percentage of women enrolled in tertiary education. And I can remember back when I visited the region in the 1990s going to Romania and being told that women had been virtually eliminated from parliament at that time. When I asked what the explanation was somebody said to me well it is the reaction to the excesses of Mrs. Ceausescu. I found that very unconvincing given that men had not suffered a similar fate for what can only be described as the crimes of her husband.

One of the great privileges of my husband being Prime Minister was that I got to travel with him and sometimes to go on my own and to see things which as a lawyer in my country I would never have seen. But wherever I went in the developing world or in areas of conflict I was trying to meet with local women and hear about their lives and their hopes, and dreams for their families. And it is those meetings not so much the glittering state occasions which leave the most striking memories. Again and again I would meet women entrepreneurs who would impress me with their drive their education and their capacity but they all told me how difficult it was for them to get the support and recognition that they needed to build up their businesses and improve their lives. I always came back humbled by that stories and wanting to do something to help.

So when my husband stepped down as a Prime Minister and I actually had more freedom to talk and to do what I wanted to do, I carried on with my legal career but I also set up my own Foundation to help women entrepreneurs. To help women gain confidence that they need to drive their businesses, the technical expertise to increase their capability in business tasks and the important access to capital that they have to have if they to grow successful businesses which go beyond the domestic realm of microfinance into the real drivers of small and medium size enterprises which actually grow economic development.

We started in a small way, but I am delighted to say that now we have more than 10 projects up and running in the Middle East, in Africa and in South Asia. We invest women in countries where they lack equal opportunities so that they can build and expand their businesses and benefit themselves and their families and their communities. One of our initiatives is a global initiative that we are doing in partnership with Google and we just developed an online mentoring service where pioneering entrepreneur, women entrepreneur in the developing world can get advice from professional men and women who want to help them around the world.

Yesterday when I spoke at the EBRD we finished the session with the presentation its annual presentation to women achievers. And the Award “The Businesswoman of the Year” went to a Croatian woman, who expanded her small organic food company the chief set up in the

1990s from employing two people to employ overall 100 and who extended her products from healthy food to cosmetics and other environmentally friendly items. She told me she wants to be the Body Shop of the Balkans and frankly speaking I am sure she would do it.

And I told her a story of one of our successful mentoring partnerships between a British man and a Palestinian woman who herself wanted to realize the ambition of transforming a small home cooking business into the traditional Palestinian restaurant. He helped her set-up a business plan. He helped her get access to finance and he saw her through to the opening of that business. When she heard that she instantly offered to be a mentor herself and I know she would be a wonderful one because many of the women we helped wanted to do exactly the sort of business that she is doing. But I know there are many successful men in this room and we are always looking for the volunteers to be mentors so should you want to join us please see me after this.

But how can women overcome the barriers preventing from setting up their own businesses isn't just creating jobs and spreading prosperity how important those things are. By giving women financial independence, women get more say and influence in the key decisions in their families in their communities, in their societies. And I just want to reassure the men in this room that tackling gender discrimination is not about women replacing men I have three sons and only one daughter I really would not like to do that. It is actually about men and women working together using their different qualities, maximizing the potential of everybody to improve life for all. So I am delighted that Petar, he wanted to highlight the role of women in your work and work that the center will be doing to promote its goals across the world. And I am confident that working together with equal respect with equal dignity, with equal access to opportunities that men and women in the Western Balkans regions will achieve that better life for everyone that we are all searching for! Thank you! [Applause]