



**Remarks by
Her Excellency First Lady Debbie M. Remengesau**

**African Women's Forum Crans Montana
"Women's Empowerment in the Economic & Political Frameworks"**

**Friday, March 16, 2018
Dahkla, Morocco**

His Majesty King Mohammed VI, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, Assalamualaikum or as we say in my country, ALII!

It is my distinct honor to be here for the CRANS Montana Forum among friends and allies from nations and organizations around the world, and I look forward to working to achieve our common goals together.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to His Majesty King Mohammed VI and the people of Morocco for hosting this forum. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to President Pierre-Emmanuel Quirin of the Crans Montana Forum and its numerous staff - especially those working behind the scenes - for all their hard work in organizing this event and making our successful gathering possible. Thank you.

As your speaker, I am here today to deliberate on the theme of "Women's Empowerment in Economic and Political Frameworks". I would like to begin by sharing a little bit about myself and the cultural traditions of my country to give you some context and background.

My name is Debbie Remengesau.

I am a Mother of 4, a Grandmother of 5, and a homemaker.

I am from the Republic of Palau, a remote island nation situated in the north-eastern Pacific Ocean. By population we are one of the smallest nations on the planet with about 20,000 citizens.

I am married to a fisherman who has lately taken some time out of his fishing career to become the President of Palau.... Since my husband's career change,

we have less fish in the house, but I have the distinct honor of being Palau's First Lady!

Palau is a matrilineal society. In our traditional leadership, women have always held positions of power and respect. In fact, it is the women of Palau who choose our male clan leaders and it is women who dismiss him if he is not doing a good job!

Our men dictate the security and protection of our communities and our country. In this way, men and women fulfil important interconnected roles that weave together the strong fabric of our society.

Our deep-rooted cultural wisdom and traditions have been faithfully passed down through the generations, prevailing despite many colonial occupations and outside influences – an experience I know we share with many African peoples. In traditional and customary governance, Palauan women hold powers denied to many women elsewhere in the world – something I am very proud to say we also have in common with many African women!

A woman's wellbeing is central to the wellbeing of our community: an example of this is our tradition of the "First Birth Ceremony". This celebrates a woman's strength in giving birth to her first child and is one of many that mark the revered role of women in Palauan society.

The influence of women is not limited to culture and traditional practices. Women played an integral role in our struggle for independence, and asserted that our traditional principles be at the heart of our nation's new Constitution. In what became a long and painful time in our history, our women leaders called upon the powers that have traditionally rested with women. Courageous women travelled between villages and islands; they shared information with communities and stood up to intense outside pressure in order to secure a "Nuclear Free" provision in our Constitution.

It was grassroots networking at its best, and at its hardest: women talked to women as they worked in their taro patches. This case now features in textbooks for students of government globally as an example of "women having political efficacy" but for us, this is the way we have always done things.

Today, inspired by our matriarchal cultural identity, women are active contributors both traditionally and in our modern development as a young nation. Women hold many roles in government and private sectors - from judges, doctors, teachers and businesswomen, to public officials in our State and National Congresses. We are one of only a few countries to have had a

woman serve as vice president, and we currently have two women serving as Ministers in the President's eight-member cabinet.

At this stage in our world's history and in our humanity, this message of equality is of vital importance. But equality wasn't the only valuable lesson our ancestors taught us...

Ancient Palauans long foresought the critical value of the environment, the land and the ocean, to our survival and to our way of life as Palauans - our cultural identity. We have long known what the rest of the world is fast discovering: that without a healthy environment, we have no future.

As world citizens, it is our responsibility to protect, conserve, and respect our oceans and our lands - our precious planet. Our children, our future generation, are counting on us to preserve our resources for their survival.

Palau is a large ocean state and the ocean that surrounds our beautiful island home is a constant reminder of how, despite our remote location, we are inextricably linked to the rest of the world.

Just like in a marriage, this link is for better, or for worse.

Because of this connection, today we Palauans find ourselves unexpectedly on the front line of global environmental challenges such as climate change, global warming, and pollution.

As a mother and a grandmother, this is deeply concerning to me.

Pollution threatens our marine life and the coral reefs that sustain our livelihood. Rising water levels as a result of climate change have destroyed parts of our country and will soon completely devastate some of our Pacific island neighbors such as Kiribati and the Marshall Islands – leaving their people without a country to call home.

As a Palauan woman, responsible for home and land, this poses the greatest threat to our survival that our country has ever encountered. Our children's future is in peril and it will take the efforts of all of us to rewrite the ending of this story.

People say that Palau leads the world in conservation and it is true that we were the first country to ban nuclear testing, the first to ban the destructive practice of bottom trawling, and that our waters are the world's first shark sanctuary - but all of these decisions were made using our ancient cultural wisdom of

environmental stewardship: not doing these things simply did not make sense if we wanted our environment, and therefore our people, to survive.

Two and a half years ago, my husband and our traditional chiefs declared Palau's national waters and exclusive economic zone the Palau National Marine Sanctuary, thus closing our ocean to commercial fishing and creating the largest percentage of fully-protected marine territory in the world. This move will help replenish depleting fish stocks, protect endangered species, and help our precious ocean recover...

This decision was a modern interpretation of our traditional cultural practice, but this time, it would benefit the rest of the world, too.

To help spread this global message, at the end of last year, a women-led initiative in Palau created another world first: The Palau Pledge. The Palau Pledge is our official passport stamp and is printed into every visitor's passport in their own language. Every visitor to our country must make an oath to the children of Palau. During their stay they promise to do the right thing to protect and preserve Palau and to respect our children's home and their future. We hope that it will also make them think of the actions they take at home.

My husband has often been heard to quote the proverb "We do not inherit this earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children."

Imagine if our politicians, business leaders, legislators, and educators made decisions guided by an environmental Pledge to the next generation....

What a different world this would be.

We are all connected, and ultimately, we are all just visitors on this planet.

As women, as the mothers and grandmothers of this world, we have tremendous power to effect real change in our communities and our countries. Together we are strong. So I encourage you today to be inspired by the women of Palau, who unite in times of crisis to take a stand for what's right and lead their community. We owe it to our children, and our children's children, to take the lead when it comes to saving their future. I hope you can join me on this journey and together, we will restore their birthright.

Thank you.