Rhetorical Analysis: Hillary Clinton and Women’s Rights

Taylor H. Hawkins

Longwood University

On September 5th, 1995, Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered an elaborate speech on women’s rights at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. As First Lady of the United States at the time, her role in society had significant influence and the words she spoke held very important meaning to all that listened to it. I chose to analyze this speech because women’s rights are just as important today as they were to Hillary Clinton 22 years ago.

The speech’s main objective was “Women’s Rights are Human Rights”, meaning that women should be treated the same as everyone else, and should be able to obtain the same rights and same opportunities regardless of the fact they are female or not. Clinton used the advantage of her being a woman speaking on women’s rights to her advantage. She wanted to bring attention to the bigger picture and she wanted her speech to appeal not just to women, but to men as well. Hillary Clinton’s social status at the time as well as the passion she put behind her words made for her speech to become a very persuasive speech to her audience at the time.

When Hillary wrote her speech, she wanted it to appeal to not only her audience at the time, but to all those would eventually hear it in the future. She had to use many persuasive writing techniques and rhetorical devices. Aristotle’s three appeals: Ethos, Logos, and Pathos can be identified in her speech. She made it evident throughout her speech what her purpose was and what points she wanted to bring across to her audience.

The Ethos of the speech could be identified right off the bat. Hillary could be considered a credible source of information due to her experiences and her political influence. She was a practicing lawyer with a degree from the prestigious law school of Yale. In her speech, she speaks about how “earlier today I participated in a World Health Organization Forum…Tomorrow, I will attend a gathering of the United Nations Development Fund for Women”. Hillary included these statements in her speech to show that she had experience and knowledge on the subject matter of which she was speaking on. She used this persuasive technique to show that she was passionate about women’s rights and wanted to do more and be able to discover programs to improve the lives of women. She made sure that her years of experience were made evident in her speech, she stated, “Over the past 25 years, I have worked persistently on issues to women, children, and families. Over the past two and half years, I’ve had the opportunity to learn more about the challenges facing women in my own country and around the world”. Clinton’s use of specific years or numbers was used to help draw the attention of the audience. The audience is more likely to pay attention to her saying “twenty five years” rather than her saying “many” years. She gave specific details of her experiences in her travels of meeting women from all around the world and identifying their troubles and struggles, as well as their triumphs. She says, “I have met women in South Africa who helped lead the struggle to end apartheid and are now helping to build a new democracy. I have met with the leading women of my own hemisphere who are working every day to promote literacy and better health care for children in their countries. I have met women in India and Bangladesh who are taking out small loans to buy milk cows, or rickshaws, or thread in order to create a livelihood for themselves and their families." The use of her words, not just her background, helped to make her a credible speaker.

There were many examples of pathos in the speech she gave. In a speech like this, in order to get people to understand where she was coming from and in order for people to relate to her and her views on women’s rights, she had to appeal to people and their emotions. It was critical that people understand what's going on in the lives of women not just in her country, but all women around the world. Just stating facts about the struggles and the events going on around the world would not draw attention to the audience. In her speech she used many techniques to appeal to the emotions of her audience and to help them pay close attention to the issues on which she was speaking on. She talks of certain topics that women all over the world have had to endure. She emphasizes that “women are most often the ones whose human rights are violated”. Hillary speaks of how hard women have to work just for their basic human rights, rights that they should not have to work hard for at all, because they are not just the rights of women, but the rights of all humans. She used the phrase “It is a violation of human’s rights…” over and over again to truly emphasize how important these statements were to her. The topics of rape and violence over the course of women’s history are brought up, to show just how serious these rights are to women and how some of the actions taken against women just because they are women is inhumane.

On the topic of violence, she says “It is a violation of human rights when a leading cause of death worldwide among women ages 14 to 44 is the violence they are subjected to in their own homes by their own relatives…It is a violation of human rights when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation.” She uses the age of the women, to make people pay close attention that the age range basically goes towards children, that there are young women out there being beaten and mistreated by even members of their own family. She helps people visualize the seriousness of the ordeals by using words such as “brutalized”. The topic of rape is addressed when she says, “It is a violation of human rights when individual women are raped in their own communities and when thousands of women are subjected to rape as a tactic or prize of war”. Abortion is addressed in the sentence, “It is a violation of human rights when women are denied the right to plan their own families, and that includes being forced to have abortions or being sterilized against their will”. Using the phrase, “against their will”, puts visual representation in the mind of the audience that women basically have no control over their own bodies, they have no say in whether or not they wish to have babies or not, or whether or not they were allowed to keep the babies they had already been growing in their own wombs. These sensitive topics she addressed in her speech really made people think of the serious nature of situations that women around the world were faced with. The entire section of her speech where she talks of the “violation of human rights”, can make an audience sit back and think of their own human rights. The purpose of that portion of the speech was to persuade the audience to get in touch with their feelings on the matter. Hillary’s use of pathos in her speech was widespread throughout. She wanted people to relate with her not only on a personal level but a national and political level. She wanted people to visualize her point of view, and want to stand with her as she advocated for women’s rights and human rights.

In her speech, the appeal to logos was not as widespread to that of pathos. Her use of logos ties in with the connection she drew from women’s rights and humans rights. The main theme of her message can be addressed in the statement she made that “Human rights are women’s rights and Women’s rights are Human Rights”. The use of her words establish Logos. She repeats important phrases that she wants the audience to pay attention to. She uses the word choice “Violation” in hopes to get people to understand the injustice of the acts and to let people know that these actions that are happening around the world that are “violating” the rights of women must be stopped. She also uses phrases such as “will flourish” to help people understand that simply giving women basic rights will not only help themselves, but their families, and their communities. She says, “What we are learning around the world is that if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work and earn as full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish. And when families flourish, communities and nations do as well”. The word choice that she used in her speech is very important. She wants people to pay attention to what she is saying, so she used repetitive phrases to have the audience draw their meaning. She uses facts to make people realize the importance of women in the world. She states, Women comprise more than half the world’s population” This statement is an appeal to logic, because it makes people realize just how many women there are in the world and what influences they could have.

 This speech that Hillary Clinton gave 22 years ago still is relevant to our society today. For hundreds of years women’s rights have been a topic of discussion, in 1995 she wished to draw attention to the bigger picture, that “Women’s Rights are Human Rights”. She used her political status and her advantage as a woman to deliver a speech that would appeal to not only women, but to men and all other members of the society. She had to make a very convincing argument throughout her speech about the importance of women being treated like they are humans, not like they are property or not like they are outcasts of society.

References

Clinton, H. R. (1995, September 05). Women's Rights are Human Rights. Speech presented at United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in China, Beijing.