

**SPEECH OF THE FIRST LADY OF COLOMBIA, NOHRA
PUYANA DE PASTRANA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE
TENTH CONFERENCE OF SPOUSES OF HEADS OF
STATE AND GOVERNMENT OF THE AMERICAS**

Quito, November 9th, 2001

In Colombia there are 7 million young people aged between 15 and 25. More than half of them are teenagers. They are part of cultural youth organizations, in which the definition of their identity depends largely on their regional, social, economic and political context. Their social expressions vary, depending on the opportunities which they have in life, and naturally, according to the degree of political and civic participation which they have in their communities.

Fortunately, our youngsters are the largest participating group in the Colombian democracy. It is no exaggeration for me to say that it was the young students of universities and of schools in my country who, as a result of an electoral option known as "the seventh ballot paper", began the most important political reform of the last 30 years in Colombia, culminating with the promulgation of a new Constitution in 1991.

Our American history has witnessed many movements of the young, over almost 200 years. We need think no further back than the heroes of our Independence, who often came straight out of school into the revolutionary armies.

However, in Colombia, the young did not begin to express themselves in political terms until the 1960s. Then, their voices were tinged with existential philosophy, nihilism and esoteric ideals, with the constant refrain of freedom and justice, and with poems which sought equality, or rendered tribute to heroic ideals.

These were the voices which made possible that in 1985, the issues related to their interests trespassed the barriers of a schoolroom or a university lecture-theatre, to become a priority in world development. More than 1000 young people came together then to discuss a comprehensive policy for youth.

With the new Constitution of 1991, which I have already mentioned, there was explicit mention of the groups which were trying to open up new opportunities for change in

approaches and habits which limit the future of sectors of the population such as subsistence farmers, the young, ethnic groups, the disabled, and women.

During the 1990s, we have seen the creation of the Presidential Advisory Office for Youth, Women and the Family, as an agency responsible for the coordination of these policies. Further on in 1993, the Health Law brought in major reforms regarding social security for the young. Four years later, the Youth Law was passed to establish policies and strategies which will be basic for the promotion of the development of our young. All these processes have had direct consequences in this administration, as the Government regulated the Youth Councils, and created the presidential program "Young Colombia" .

Perhaps the most important step forward in the development of youth policy has been the "Youth Law" (Law 375 of 1997), whose transition through Congress came after a process of consultation in several cities. Within this new legal framework, attention to the young of Colombia has ceased to be a matter simply for government, and has become part of State policy.

The Youth Law proposes comprehensive care for children, based on their rights and a vision of youth which includes the many dimensions of their realities. Perhaps the greatest emphasis of this law lies in participation, since it introduces the Departmental, Municipal and Metropolitan Youth Councils as their collegiate and representative bodies.

Today, the young are present in all cultural and political processes in ways which are very different from those of former years. This is the logic of history, which continually generates new forms of conduct. The leading part played by youth in public life passes through student organizations, community movements, and -sad to say- in the armed groups beyond the pale of the law.

By good fortune, we can say today that there is no one under 18 years of age serving in Colombia's armed forces. A bill that seeks to disengage young Colombians from conflict and allow them to be where they should be: in the bosom of their family, at school, at the university, in the library, in the laboratory, and playing on the fields.

Consequently, over the last 10 years the young have become valued interlocutors to be taken into account in political decisions, in government plans, in the legislation, and in community life in general.

Our policies are focused towards this objective, but with an additional ingredient: not only do we want the young to invent their own youth, we also want them to help us with their initiatives, their creativity and their vital force, to invent a new country.

Nowadays, it is essential for America to develop an articulated and integral public policy to improve the quality of life of one of the most important groups of our population: that of the adolescents in the Americas.

In this, we want youngsters who can be real citizens, the kind of citizens that once defined the Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater:

"I understand a citizen to be an aware and active member of a democratic society: a person who knows his individual rights and his public duties, and therefore he does not shun

intervention in the political management of the community which interests him, nor does he automatically delegate all the obligations imposed on him by this intervention in the hands of `specialist managers`".

This is the type of citizen which our young would like to be, and which we have the obligation to encourage. Our youngster isn't an isolated individual with particular interests; he is a true citizen, that although cannot vote, transforms his country with his dreams.

Thank you very much.