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Summit Weighs Women's Role in Changing World

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DUBLIN, Ireland—About 300 high-profile politicians, artists, activists and corporate leaders from 53 countries kicked off a global summit of women Thursday to discuss their role in the changing world order.

"We know a great deal about how to get things done outside the stale male mind-set," organizer Irene Natividad declared in opening remarks at the historic Abbey Theater.

"We are strong, we are persistent, we are smart," the American feminist said. "There are more of us, and we live longer."

Such wry observations were punctuated by serious calls for assertive steps to change the traditional structure and values of a male-dominated world.

"Women must be very cautious when embarking on a leadership path," warned Iceland's President Vigdis Finnbogadottir, one of two female heads of state addressing the conference.

"If you do something wrong," she continued, "you will be attacked with the strongest weapon—mockery."

Unlike men, Finnbogadottir said, mistakes made by women inevitably reflect on their entire gender.

The chief prejudices women must combat, she added, are that "women are not competitive enough or women do not understand economics."

Under the theme "New Visions of Leadership," the four-day conference is expected to include among its guests Betty Friedan, founder of the National Organization for Women; Cai Jinqing, a student leader during the 1989 Tian An Men Square protests in Beijing, and former U.S. Rep. Bella Abzug (D-N.Y.).

But some of the biggest names the forum promised to draw dropped out for "various reasons," said a spokeswoman, Geraldine McInerney. Among the missing were writers Alice Walker and Susan Faludi, former Pakistani leader Benazir Bhutto and actress Olympia Dukakis.

Panel discussions were planned on topics such as the economics of world hunger, religious freedom, women's health and leadership.

Delegates to the conference have championed a variety of feminist causes around the globe—from fighting genital mutilation in tribal Africa to lobbying for housework to be included in Norway's gross national product.

Ireland's first female president, Mary Robinson, told the opening session, "This is not just a conference about leadership . . . [but] also a forum about perceptions of leadership."