Mary Robinson is currently the President of Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative. She served as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002 at the request of Kofi Annan. Prior serving as UNHCHR, she was the first female President of Ireland, a position that she held from 1990-1997. She is also the co-founder and former Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders and the Honorary President of Oxfam International. She is a professor of practice at Columbia University and member of the Advisory Board of the Earth Institute and Extraordinary Professor at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. She serves as Chancellor of Dublin University.

What were some of the struggles you faced during the election process and how did running as a candidate outside the principle political parties shape your presidential experience?

When I was nominated by the Irish Labor Party but stood as an independent, the odds given against me winning were 100 to 1, so initially I was making a case for a much more active and relevant presidency directly elected by the people. It was only later—when I began to get very good feedback and the opinion polls began to show that I had a chance of winning—that I mentally realized that this [election] could perhaps be won. I think from that moment on, I became more like a traditional candidate and there to win. It is hard to mention any specific problems. There were various key moments in the campaign. I remember the night of the final count when it was clear that I was going to win because I was getting the votes from the third candidate, who had been eliminated. His votes were coming to me and would bring me above the deputy prime minister, who had gotten the highest number of initial votes. But this is the Irish voting system. I remember the huge sense of responsibility I felt to fulfill the expectations that people had.

How did your coming from the outside affect your presidency, your outlook, and how you got things done?

I think it was part of the reason why I was able to change the way the president was perceived. It defined how I would seek to fulfill my responsibilities, even in the grey area of what is not written down. But when you are the directly elected president, how can you relate to people? How can you fill that kind of gap? I think the main asset I had was that, as a constitutional lawyer, I was confident that a good deal of the trappings around the presidency which prevented my predecessors from having a fuller role, were actually just traditions. They
were not based on anything in the constitution itself. So, I was able to look at the Constitution and see the potential of a directly elected president. But I was always aware of the need to be absolutely faithful to the constitution. I made the commitment to be as active as possible but always within the constraints that applied to a non-executive president. It was very interesting to develop a relatively small space, and very satisfying to find that you could fulfill a role that was complementary to the political power exercised by the Taoiseach and the government in Ireland. It was ultimately a kind of moral authority. I learned how difficult it is to exercise moral authority well. You have got to really work very hard at it.

**Can you describe your experience as the first female president of Ireland?**

What seemed to really impact people on the day of the formal inauguration on the 3rd of December was not so much the television coverage of me taking the oath, but when I came outside afterwards and inspected the guard of honor. It was a shock that a woman would be inspecting the guard of honor. I think that was when people said, “there really is a huge change.”

**While you were president, you made a huge effort to visit war-torn states such as Rwanda and Tibet, among other locations. What is the reasoning behind this? Please describe the most impressionable state visit and why it was so.**

When I was elected president, I actually said in my inauguration that I hoped to be able to represent an Ireland that cared about issues of human rights. I had no idea how I was going to do that and it worried me. So, in many ways, I was looking for opportunities not just to pay the normal state visits, which I paid quite a number of times because I was invited. I think I was known and invited to pay state visits which were important for Ireland, for the country we were visiting, and for bilateral relations and so on. But I wanted to carry out other kinds of visits to countries that needed support.

The first visit was to Somalia in 1992 and it was brought about by contriving a situation. I had long relations with the development agencies in Ireland, Concern, Goal, and Trocaire and they were working in Somalia in a situation that was becoming an absolute crisis. The conflict was preventing the food from getting to the feeding stations: the places where long queues of people were waiting for essentials. The development agencies had contacted my office and we had arranged that they would come for a meeting and that Irish television would also be invited and I would be asked on live television, “President, would you come to Somalia?” and my answer was, which they knew, would be “Yes, I would really like to come to Somalia, if the government would allow me.” It was a very memorable visit because the conflict was appalling. I actually met the two worst warlords and talked to them about trying to bring about some peace. I had the Irish foreign minister with me. It was really tough to see the situation at the feeding stations and my voice broke when I tried to explain my strong feelings at the press conference. I was very angry with that because I was a barrister and I felt that I should be more professional. Letting my emotions show through, to me, seemed not to be appropriate. It so happened that that was one of the most compelling messages I had. I learned that showing a bit of emotion at times is not a bad thing. Doing so can be a good thing, especially if the emotion comes strongly from within. Then, I went to the UN and spoke to the then Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali and UN officials about increasing security on the ground. That led to the US putting troops in on the ground in Somalia. We know the sad outcome of that.

I made three working visits to Rwanda. I was the first head of state to visit after the genocide and killing in 1994 and I will never forget the sight of all the clothes and children’s shoes, the blood on blocks of wood where heads or limbs had been chopped off, the smell of blood, the devastation, and the large number of prisoners cooped up in inadequate prisons because they were the perpetrators of this terrible killing. I went back in 1995 to bring home to the United Nations the difficulties of a poor country trying to cope with the aftermath of a genocide and killing and its need for more support, the need for more healing, more trauma counseling, more support for women, etc. I did it because I was going to represent Ireland at the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations. The third time, I got an invitation to go to Rwanda in March of 1997 for a pan African women’s conference. This was remarkable. Less than three years after the genocide and killing, these widows, these traumatized women, managed to host a pan African conference. It set Rwanda on a very remarkable recovery course and the country now has the highest number of women in Parliament in
the world, women as chief justices, women as chiefs of police. Women pay a very significant role there and Rwanda is doing very well in relative terms. I also remember representing Ireland at Nelson Mandela’s inauguration. You can imagine how incredible that experience, and paying a state visit to South Africa two years later, was. There were other visits that were very memorable, like a state visit to Japan, which was very important for Japanese Irish economic relations. I have many incredible memories. It was a huge honor to serve as president for seven years.

Please describe the process to the ceasefire between the IRA and the State of Ireland. What were the implications of your visit to Northern Ireland in your opinion?

As a non-executive president, I actually didn’t have any direct role in the negotiations for a peace process. What I was trying to do was more modest. It was to encourage the women’s groups, the inter religious groups, and the business groups that were trying to create the wider conditions for peace. I invited a number of groups, Protestant, and Catholic, and sometimes groups came together to my official residence in Dublin. As a result, 6 local groups in Republican Catholic West Belfast invited me to visit. It was known that if I went, I would meet the local representatives, of whom one was Gerry Adams, the head of Sinn Féin. The British Government certainly did not want me to go and the Irish government I believe really did not want me to go either. I was going more to meet the local groups with which I had worked and to give them support. It was actually incredibly important that I went because when I arrived in Republican West Belfast, the sense of emotion was incredible. Catholic West Belfast was isolated from a British system its people did not want to be under and from a Dublin system that did not want to really get close to. There was a double isolation and my visit broke that to a certain extent. I was also heavily criticized by some Irish newspapers. It was controversial, but I learned that you need to sometimes take risks for peace and you need to be prepared to take criticism and be unpopular if what you think you are doing is right. You should not be arrogant or ignore advice but, at the end of the day, if something is really important based on your principles and you believe it will improve something, it is important to do it.

What was the most challenging decision that you had to make while president, inside or outside that position? If you could walk us through that decision process, that would be great.

One of them—because I think there were several different kinds of decisions—was very early in my presidency. It was known that the Dalai Lama was going to visit Ireland to open an exhibition of Tibetan art, and my office got a message that the Dalai Lama would very much like to meet with the president. The suggestion was to meet at the exhibition, not even at the official residence. It is hard to explain but I was getting advice from the Irish government that they did not want me to meet him. It wasn’t actually the government, but it was the Taoiseach of the day, Charlie Haughey, that did not want to meet the Dalai Lama without explaining why. And I said well, I am a human rights person, I am not even inviting the Dalai Lama to my official residence, which a predecessor of mine had done. I am accepting an invitation to join with him in the exhibition he was going to. There was a sort of pressure. It was very hard to explain what that pressure was but it was extraordinarily heavy because I was trying to be faithful to the constitution and to be appropriate in my relationship with government, but I really felt very strongly that I should meet the Dalai Lama. In the back of my mind was the thought that the government, which was of a different political persuasion than I, and which I had beaten in the recent elections for the presidency, perhaps had an agreement with China for a big export relationship of importance to the Irish economy and that if I met the Dalai Lama, the Chinese would cancel and I would then be exposed. “You know, she so wanted in her ego to meet that Dalai Lama that she put this at risk.” Nevertheless, I felt it was important that I meet the Dalai Lama. When I met him in the exhibition, in a private room before we went out together to look at the exhibition, I remember in quite an extraordinary way how put his arm on me and he said, “I know, I know” because I was so emotionally exhausted at that stage that I was actually almost sick with the responsibility of doing the right thing. When subsequently the Dalai Lama left Ireland and went to other countries, he used the photograph that he had with me to visit other countries because I was the only head of state in Europe who met him on that visit. So, that was another pressure but I have gotten to know him very well since then. I think that he really understood how difficult it had been but that I was determined to
meet with him. Afterwards, I did visit Tibet in my first visit to China in 1998.

**Human rights is such a vast topic and I think a lot of people are confused as to what exactly it entails. What exactly is your definition of human rights?**

I've really tried to explain that in the lecture about strategies for the 21st century. I drew partly on my earlier experience in my work for five years as High Commissioner for Human Rights and was trying to give leadership on human rights and how to implement human rights in practice. I would say that we need more consensus about the human rights agenda and, to me, that means we have to embrace the human rights agenda of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in 1948 and which every government in the world supports. No matter how bad their human rights record may be, they all support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It includes the two streams of rights: civil and political rights. Right to life, no torture, independence of judiciary, democratic elections, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion, as well as rights to food, safe water, health, education and shelter. We have to have a world where both sets of rights are fully cherished, wherever you go. Only then will we have a full implementation of human rights.

**What would you say to people who criticize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as being unproductive since it is unable to hold its signatories accountable?**

It is a charter of values. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was not intended to be enforced in that way. It is a charter of shared values. Subsequently, governments entered into covenants, conventions, and declarations and we can hold them accountable for that. We cannot do so very efficiently, but it is important that what happens in countries and between countries is held to the standards the countries voluntarily committed to. The importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is that it is a clear charter of most important values. The most important of all is Article 1, which begins by saying that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. I find dignity's place before rights very strong. So when we talk about dignity, it means that sense of self, that sense of identity, one that is not cherished equally in different parts of the world. There is at the moment a strong campaign about the adolescent girl because the girl child is often a second-class citizen in her family, her community, her schools, in economics, and in every sense. As important as her rights is her dignity. If you see somebody homeless lying in a doorway, in my experience, what hurts the most is that they are also invisible. We pass them by because we don't want to see them. We don't see them, and that is rendering them less than human. So being equal in dignity and rights is a very important part of human rights, more so than asserting rights. It is shared responsibility to further the dignity and rights of every individual regardless of race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference, and so on.

**We know that there has been a lot of controversy over Israel's takeover of the West Bank recently, and that publicity has been generated based on your participation in the Durban Conference in 2001. What is your opinion about claims of the extreme racism of Israel against Palestine? What do you think is the right balance between the two populations?**

I think to achieve the right balance between the issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is extremely difficult, particularly within the UN system, because both sides consider themselves to be victims and there is a certain basis for that on both sides. For the Palestinians, it is the occupied land and the repressions of various sorts. For the Israelis, it is the fact that the UN structure has Israel in a particular position. On the agenda of the Human Rights Council, every time that issue comes up, Israel is singled out. It wonders “we are one of the few democracies in that part of the world and look at the issues of other countries, why is there not more fairness and balance? Even if we were to agree that there are issues that we need to defend, why are we singled out?” So it is extremely difficult. I am a human rights person and I went out of my way with everything that I could do with a sense of moral ability and moral authority to be absolutely fair because, in my view, human rights do not belong to the Palestinians or to the Israelis. They belong to both. Both must have their human rights defended and, because Israel is on the stronger side of that issue, there are very good Israeli human rights people in B'Tselem and other
human rights organizations, who take issues on the Palestinian side because they too, like me, are human rights defenders.

The Durban conference is a complex story and I am writing a bit about it at the moment. Again, I was the Secretary General on the world conference against racism, which was the third World Conference after the first two had failed. The Palestinians and those who supported the Palestinians wanted to use the World Conference to highlight some of the issues, but there was also an approach which was completely the antithesis of the World Conference of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, etc. which was to put anti-Semitic language into the agenda. This happened in a regional conference in Tehran and I attended because I was High Commissioner, but I was not responsible for the conference’s site in Tehran, nor did I have any political say about that. Governments should have known that having it in Iran was not a good idea.

That was a kind of a different responsibility. I think I underestimated how damaging having that language in the text in Tehran would be because I was looking at it from a technical point of view. The language was in square brackets and therefore didn’t actually exist yet. It would only exist if it was agreed upon. But because the language was there, many Jewish groups took offense, as I take offense, and did take offense at the time. But I was operating on the basis of “we will get this language out, it will never be in the final text.” So that kind of professional thing, and as we moved closer to Durban, the United States and Israel were complaining that that language had to be taken out, The Chair of the conference, which was South Africa, the foreign minister, Madame Zuma (President of the Conference), and I were saying the same thing, “it will be taken out at the end of the conference.” But the United States said no, it must be taken out now and the pressure was in Congress and in civil society, etc. After 48 hours passed and the language had not been removed, there was a complex range of negotiations going on and the United States and Israel withdrew from the conference. The conference almost collapsed and I went to the EU and Madame Zuma who were together at the time and said, “look, this conference is about a whole range of things. It is about how countries treat indigenous peoples, and the Roma in Europe, migrants, cross sectional discrimination where you have a woman migrant who happens to be Mexican. These are all important issues. This conference must go ahead and we must get that language out at the end.” We did. There was absolutely no anti-Semitic language in the final text.

The conference ended on the 8th of September 2001. Three days later, the terrible attacks of 9/11 happened and because we were working in the conference and I was also working in civil society trying to stop horrible anti-Semitism in the street, there were terrible marches, epithets, and caricatures. There was one evening in which I again got emotional and held up the cartoons and said, “this is a conference against racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, what are we doing?” I said, “I am a Jew. We are all Jews. What are we doing?” And it was headlined the following morning: I am a Jew. But somehow in the United States, Tom Lenthouse—who was a very influential Congressman and had been a friend of mine beforehand because we were both human rights people—thought that I had power beyond belief and that I wasn’t exercising my power to prevent the anti-Semitism.

In this country, there is a sense in some cases that I am responsible, which is way out there, and in other cases, that I could have done more. In any situation like that, I think anybody can look back and say maybe I could at some point have done more. What I do know is I was doing 100 percent of what I could do in a very imperfect situation and I have a clear conscience that I was doing my best. Ultimately, we did get an agenda that had no anti-Semitism, but it was too late for a number of people. The irony is that this was the most difficult issue I faced and I was going to talk about it earlier but I thought it was a bit difficult. I got high praise for the World Conference Against Racism in Durban from indigenous peoples worldwide, from the Dalit [the untouchable class] in India even though they did not get text about it, from the Roma in Europe, from migrants, and especially from Africans. And I still get it. I was recently with African leaders and one just told me, “I was in Durban and you did a fantastic job.” So I can hardly complain. Praise in one area and sticks in another. But it hurts me that anyone would think for a moment that, as somebody who lives with human rights and who finds human rights as a motivation to get up in the morning, that I could have an anti-Semitic thought in my head. Because I do not, I will not, and never would, so it is a little bit hurtful sometimes.

Is there anything that you would like to communicate to our readership?

What I would like to communicate is a strong sense of the importance of the values of human rights
in our 21st century and that the speech that I am
giving here at Stanford is from the heart. It is also an
interesting moment in time for me because I came to
Stanford in 2003 and gave the tenure lectures shortly
after I had left the UN. Now, I am looking back on that
and saying, “what have I learned in almost 7 years?
What do I really want to communicate?” I want to
communicate that these values are more important
than ever. Because of the attacks of 9/11 and the focus
on security, human rights have gone through a difficult
time. We really do need these values in our globalizing
world and they have to adapt to new situations. I will
also be talking about climate justice, the link between
climate change, development, and human rights,
and that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
is a kind of living document of values that has to be
made relevant to all cultures. It is not a one size fits
all. I will assert that the United States has a huge role
to play, and that I am glad to see more interest in
economic and social rights here in the United States,
including in universities. Ultimately, I will explain that
I have a sense of urgency but I do think that there are
some important things going on, including corporate
responsibility. Corporations are realizing that they too
have a responsibility to respect all human rights and
that this is more than just doing no harm. They have
to actually know what they are doing. There has to be
some due diligence about what they are doing, and that
is a very active field of work. So, I hope that anyone
reading this interview will get a sense that the human
rights agenda is very relevant, learn more about it, and
maybe even engage in it. That is my objective.