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Recipient, 2009 Inamori Ethics Prize

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Mary Robinson
Recipient of the 2009 Inamori Ethics Prize

Mary Therese Winifred Robinson was born on May 21, 1944 in Ballina, County Mayo, Ireland. She is the daughter of two Irish Catholic medical doctors. Robinson attended secondary school in Dublin, and then went on to study law at Trinity College in Dublin and Harvard Law School. In 1970, she married Nicholas Robinson and was temporarily disowned by her family for marrying a Protestant. Mary and Nicholas have three children together.

In 1969, Robinson was elected as an independent candidate of the Senate of Ireland (*Seanad Eireann*), where she served as a senator until 1989. She campaigned on a wide range of liberal issues, including the right of women to sit on juries, legalizing contraception, and fighting the requirement that all women must resign from civil service upon marriage. She also worked for many years on homosexual law reform, campaigning for the decriminalization of homosexuality in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Robinson served on multiple parliamentary committees between 1973 and 1989, including the Joint Committee on EC Secondary Legislation, where she served as chairman of its Social Affairs Sub-Committee, as well as chairman of its Legal Affairs Committee. She also served on the Joint Committee on Marital Breakdown and was a member of the Dublin City Council.

In 1990, Robinson was nominated as a candidate for the presidency by the Labor Party, with support from the Green Party. On December 3, 1990, Robinson was inaugurated as the seventh president of Ireland; she was the first female to hold this position. While president, she worked for peace and dramatically changed the face of Anglo-Irish relations. After serving for seven years, Robinson resigned her presidency in September 1997 for a new position at the UN, the High Commissioner for Human Rights. She served one full term and then extended her term an extra year following an appeal from Kofi Annan.

In 2002, Robinson founded an international non-profit organization, Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative (www.realizingrights.org). The mission of Realizing Rights is “to put human rights standards at the heart of global governance and policy-making and to ensure that the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable are addressed on the global stage.” The organization believes that the current critical global challenges are:

fostering equitable trade and decent work, realizing the right to health, shaping more humane migration policies, strengthening women leaders through intercultural forums, and encouraging corporate responsibility.

Because of Robinson's work in human rights she has received many honors, including Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award, the Sydney Peace Prize, the Otto Hahn Peace Medal in Gold, a John Jay Justice Award, and the very first "Outspoken" award from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Most recently, President Obama presented her with the United States' highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom.

On July 18, 2007, Nelson Mandela announced the formation of The Elders, a group of twelve world leaders that includes Robinson, Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan, and others. These individuals were brought together to contribute their wisdom, independent leadership, and integrity to tackle some of the world's greatest problems. The Elders travel to troubled regions and use their influence to marshal resources and give a voice to victims of intolerance, oppression, and abuse.

In 2009, Robinson was appointed the head of the International Commission of Jurists, an international human rights NGO. It is made up of sixty eminent jurists, including members of the senior judiciary in Australia, Canada, and South Africa. The commission aims to strengthen the role of lawyers and judges in protecting human rights and the rule of law. Robinson has always sought to use law as an instrument for social change, arguing landmark cases before the European Court of Human Rights, as well as in the Irish courts and the European Court in Luxembourg.

In February 2010, the Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice was created and Robinson joined the foundation full-time in January 2011. The main purpose of this organization is to address the link between human rights development and climate change. It also focuses on women's issues and female leadership, as the foundation recognizes the role that gender plays in human rights.

In 2011, the YWCA established the Mary Robinson Award for Young Women's Leadership in Human Rights. The recipients of the prize are young women activists who support and work towards women's leadership in the field of human rights, much like Robinson has done throughout her life.

Currently, Robinson serves as an honorary co-chair for the World Justice Project and on the Eminent Advisory Board of the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa. She is also an advisory council member of the

International Initiative on Maternal Mortality and Human Rights, a vocal supporter of The Big Read, and a founding member and chair of the Council of Women World Leaders. She has worked on issues of social justice and the environment as chair of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and is now chair of the GAVI Alliance Board (Global Alliance for Vaccinations and Immunizations). She chairs the Fund for Global Human Rights, is honorary president of Oxfam International, and is a patron of the International Community of Women Living with AIDS (ICW).

President Robinson embodies the ideal of global ethical leadership and is a tireless international champion of human rights. Michael Posner, executive director of the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights, said Robinson has navigated difficult and controversial issues, always emerging as a champion of those most vulnerable to abuse. She was recently described in the *International Journal of Humanities and Peace* as "one of the world's most eloquent and courageous defenders of human rights."