



## Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

Pils laukums 3, Rīga-50, LV-1900, tālr. 7092122, fakss 7320404,  
prese@president.lv, www.president.lv

---

### **Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the Women and Democracy conference, Vilnius, 15 June 2001**

Your Excellency President Adamkus,  
Honourable delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to be here in Vilnius and to address this significant forum, which follows the initiatives assumed at the 1999 conference held in Reykjavik on Women and Democracy at the Dawn of a New Millennium. Congratulations to Lithuania for exception to host an event of this importance, congratulations to all the organisers and best wishes for a successful conference, to all the delegates and participants.

Since the Reykjavik conference, several key problems have been identified in connection with discrimination against women in different areas of life and in different parts of the world. A number of countries have drafted national plans for the promotion of gender equality, and several international projects have been initiated to promote gender equality within Europe's expanding economic, educational and cultural space.

The issue of women's rights continues to be a pertinent issue on the international agenda for the simple reason that in nearly every country on this planet, women are still subjected to varying degrees and forms of discrimination. In the most extreme cases, their right to education, gainful employment, freedom of movement, freedom of expression and equal status before the law is either severely restricted or non-existent.

In general, those countries with the least democratic political systems and the most authoritarian forms of government are experiencing the most widespread abuse of human rights and the highest degree of discrimination against women. In several of these countries, women are reported to be subject to domestic violence and sexual abuse by their male family members on an alarmingly wide scale that borders on the endemic.

I will not delve into the reasons why this situation has arisen, but I will point out that in any society, social mores regarding the role and status of women and men are inherited from previous generations. Each society develops its own set of values, its own sense of right and wrong, which are then passed on from one generation to the next. This is culture, which represents the accumulated wisdom of countless generations, but sometimes, alas, also its accumulated weight of prejudice and injustice.

Fortunately, cultural and societal norms are subject to change, and in many parts of the world the general attitude towards the role of women in society has been undergoing change in the right direction. Since the theme of this conference is Women and Democracy, let us recall some interesting facts regarding women's right to vote and women's right to stand for election in various national legislatures.

In many countries, these two fundamental rights have become so self-evident that they are completely taken for granted. Yet less than a century ago, women were denied these elementary rights nearly everywhere on the planet.

Latvia and Estonia, upon declaring their independence from Russia in 1918, were among the first nations in Europe to accord women both the right to vote and the right to stand for election. Only four other European countries Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland had preceded Latvia and Estonia in adopting these progressive measures in the processes of democracy.

Other established Western democracies, such as Canada and the United States, implemented universal suffrage soon after, in 1920, followed by Lithuania and several other nations in 1921. The United Kingdom, for its part, decided to wait until 1928 before lifting all voting and election restrictions on women.

France joined this general democratic trend only following its liberation from Germany in 1944, but Switzerland stoutly held out against full womens suffrage until 1971. The last two European nations to lift voting restrictions on women were Portugal, in 1976, and Liechtenstein, in 1984.

Today, in the year 2001, such countries as Kuwait which does not accord women either the right to vote or the right to stand for office have fortunately become the exception, rather than the rule. As the above examples illustrate, the status of women in many parts of the world has experienced a marked improvement over the past 100 years. Unfortunately, this progress has not been uniform and equal across the board. A country may have made strides in one area, yet lag in several others.

The right to vote and the right to get elected to political office are but one aspect of gender equality. A country such as Pakistan might happen to elect a woman president, but at the same time declare a woman who has been the victim of rape as a criminal and hold her in prison together with her child. In some parts of the world women have been elected to political office following the assassination or tragic death of their husbands or fathers, but the number of independently elected women heads of state or government remains exceedingly small.

Progress in political participation has been especially marked in the developed Western European democracies, and more particularly in the Nordic countries. However, even Sweden, which has the highest proportion of female members of parliament, has not nearly the same proportion of women in high positions of business and finance, which indicates that even the most progressive of Western democracies have not yet managed to free themselves entirely from certain prejudices and stereotypes. But at least in the Nordic countries womens issues are being publicly debated and addressed in a serious manner.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Inequalities between men and women are most flagrant in situations of inequality and abuse of power. One example of this is the case of prostitution. In the Western world, prostitution and pornography (both legal and illegal) are very big business, with links to organised crime, even in those countries where it has been legalised. In the communist countries, prostitution used to be strictly controlled by the secret services, and women were used either for rewarding party faithfuls or for serving as agents.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the income disparity between the Western and post-communist countries has created a massive influx of women and minors into prostitution, both voluntarily (on the basis of poverty) and involuntarily through coercion, fraud and brute force.

The large demand for such services by clients in the richer Western countries has thus generated a supply from their poorer neighbours, and resulted in the illicit traffic of human flesh controlled by international crime rings. This has become a serious social problem that requires a concerted international effort in order to be contained.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The status and living conditions of women in the three Baltic countries has evolved much in the same way as in other post-communist former captive nations. Under communist rule, women formally enjoyed equal rights in all spheres of economic and political activity. In practice, however, this so-called equality manifested itself in the right to low-paid, low-skilled and low-prestige employment involving heavy physical labour or lengthy, monotonous activity.

Women from low-income families everywhere had to work, and work very hard, as only the privileged few could afford to stay at home and raise their children.

After a hard days work at the factory or at the collective farm, most women began their second shift of unpaid and unrecognised employment in tending to their children, cooking, washing, cleaning, not to mention the endless hours spent in long, storefront lines searching for food and other basic necessities. These energy- and time-consuming tasks were often accomplished with little or no help from the male family members (in those cases where the family had any), who were rarely sufficiently liberated to share in the household chores.

Single parent families, most of them headed by women, did and still do form an alarmingly large proportion of the households in many former communist countries. Such families in general were and still are poorer than average, and even today, their women providers often blame themselves and their perceived biological disadvantages as women rather than established social stereotypes for their hardships.

In Europe's former captive nations there was a great deal of rhetoric about the equality of the sexes under communism, but in practice women were conspicuously absent from the podium at the annual May Day and October Revolution parades. One look at photographs from that period will show how empty the grand statements of equality really were and how little they were applied in practice when it came to the most responsible and influential positions in the land.

The empty and pervasive rhetoric of equality in theory led to a tacit acceptance of inequality in practice. The denial of an inequality that existed in fact has become so ingrained that it is difficult for society to acknowledge inequalities where they do occur today. This was but another aspect of the doublespeak and rampant hypocrisy that was at the very essence of Soviet society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With the heavy hand of history that we have had in this region, the survival of our nations has often rested on the shoulders of our women. During the Nazi German and Soviet Russian occupations of the Second World War, as well as the post-war Stalinist period, disproportionately large number of men from Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were either shot, starved to death in the Gulag, or killed on the front, leaving a gaping hole in the demographic pyramid. In my own country, the proportion of native Latvians fell from over 80 percent in 1939 to barely 50 percent in 1989.

The decimation of the male population left countless widows and orphans, and I would also like to devote a few words to those tens of thousands of men and women from Latvia, Estonia and our host country of Lithuania, who were deported in several waves to the far reaches of Siberia. Yesterday was the 60th anniversary of the first of these mass deportations. In all three Baltic countries, the men were separated from their families as they were loaded into the cattle trains that transported them to slave labour camps beyond the polar circle. There they perished from starvation, exhaustion, unsanitary conditions, exposure, and cold, typically surviving for a maximum of two years, with few exceptions.

The women and children were also sent eastward to fend for themselves in inhospitable conditions. Most women put superhuman efforts in trying to survive and save their children from starvation. In addition to the lack of food, the cold, and the exhaustion resulting from inhumanly hard labour, women were subjected to rape and sexual

exploitation, frequently in public and under the eyes of their own children. This week, during the commemoration of these mass deportations, some of these very same children have finally come out with the first testimony of such events, over which they had remained silent for decades out of a deep sense of shame.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to now return to the present, and turn to the issue of child bearing and child rearing in relation to womens professional development. Over the ages, the capacity to bear children, which distinguishes women from men, has often served to the great disadvantage of the former. This function of biological reproduction, which is of vital importance for the continued existence of the human race, compels every childbearing woman to divest a considerable amount of time and energy into child rearing.

In the developed countries, new mothers can rely on receiving maternity leave and other social benefits to help ease the added burden of their unique responsibilities. Otherwise, a woman who chooses to become a mother may have to give up any hopes of higher education and a well-paid career.

Social benefits, however, can serve as a double-edged sword. In those countries where the employer of a childbearing mother must share in the disbursal of child-support benefits, employers are prone to display greater reluctance in hiring woman of childbearing age.

Discrimination against women also arises from established misconceptions of women as physically frail, emotionally vulnerable beings with inferior intellectual capacities. These ingrained myths, of course, have no basis in scientific fact. They only serve to maintain positions of responsibility and power as a male preserve, while denying opportunities of access to women.

Interestingly enough, some of the strongest opposition to female emancipation and professional advancement often comes from conservative women, who are firmly convinced that womans proper place is at home and in the kitchen.

The injustice that is perpetuated by such entrenched stereotypes and discrimination is detrimental not only to women, but to society as a whole, which does not get the full benefit of its entire human potential. The full use of womens creativity and talent in the economic and political sphere would help to quicken the pace of national development and ensure a more rapid increase in living standards by increasing their countries competitiveness on a global scale.

Established and entrenched misperceptions about women are difficult to change, and the process is slow, but it has to be done. Considerable educational effort will be required at every level, with the state at one end and the family at the other. Young girls must be taught that their biological destiny as child-bearers need not exclude them from achievements in business, science, politics or the arts.

I am very pleased to witness a growing, positive trend in my own country, where women are heading an increasing number of small, medium, and even large enterprises. Throughout Latvia, women are creating clubs, support groups and societies. They are assuming top posts in leading non-governmental organizations and becoming more active in politics. They are learning new languages, acquiring new skills and modernizing such traditional fields of activity as agriculture.

More and more, the women of Latvia are seizing the opportunities that freedom and democracy have opened for them. While it is true that the transition for women aged 50 years and over has been much more difficult to make, there are also women of retirement age who have successfully opened up their own businesses. While such examples may not yet be the norm, they do show that initiative and hard work can bear fruit.

It is my hope that women everywhere in Europe and in the world will increasingly explore and enter roles that traditionally have been the exclusive domain of their male

counterparts. I am convinced that women will find fulfilment and satisfaction in doing so, and that through their activities, women will contribute even more to the overall wealth of their countries and to the benefit of the societies in which they live.