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Address by H. E. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the Gender Leadership and Risks panel discussion in Davos, Switzerland, 29 January 2001

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here as the President of Latvia and as a member of the Council of Women World Leaders, especially since most everybody likes belonging to exclusive clubs. If within this gathering you count the current or former women presidents, then the club gets even smaller.

Why is that? Why is it that there are so few women in top leadership positions? I got elected on June 17, 1999 at around midnight. Two hours later, the phones started ringing from North America, where it was still daytime, with journalists asking for interviews. During the three weeks between my election and my inauguration I spent most of my time granting wall-to-wall interviews to journalists from across the world.

Had they come to Latvia because they were excited about the future of my wonderful country? Had they come because they wanted to know more about it? No, I'm afraid that most of them had come due to the novelty of the situation. Latvia had become the first country in Central and Eastern Europe to elect a woman president.

The fact that a woman had been elected was news. Many of these journalists asked me what it feels like to be a woman president. It feels fine! I answered.

Some looked a bit surprised, as I think they were expecting me to say that this was something terribly extraordinary and unusual.

Are you sure?

Yes, I truly feel just fine, thank you!

What's it like to be a woman president? The more insistent continued.

Well, it's like being a woman and like being a president, I answered.

Sometime later our government fell, as our Prime Ministers generally have a shorter lifespan in office than do our Presidents. I had the task, according to our Constitution, of naming the next Prime Minister. Somebody in Parliament hastened to publish the name of who the next Prime Minister should be. All that remained was for the President to approve his choice.

At that point I thought it would be interesting to invite a few Prime Ministerial candidates to the Riga Castle, and to have a get acquainted chat with each one of them. Among them I invited two women. One wouldn't even come to see me.

There was a big hullabaloo in the press and a big uproar all across the land. The big worry was: What are we going to do if we get two females occupying two of the country's top state posts? A female President and a female Prime Minister?

When the troubled journalists asked me this question I told them not to worry, as there was no particular danger attached to having two people of the same sex occupying two of the highest posts in the land. Latvia, it should be recalled, had always had, since its creation, Presidents and Prime Ministers of the same sex. (Both males, mind you.) So there

should also be no problem if both the President and the Prime Minister turn out to be female this time.

But people seemed to perceive it as a perplexing issue. And truly, why is there such a novel aspect to it? I think that stereotypes on what is feminine and what is masculine are sometimes still deeply engrained within us. They have been with us since the beginnings of Western civilization.

Look back to the Greek myths, and what do you find? Up on Mount Olympus there is Zeus, very virile and very strong, running after all these nubile nymphs, changing into all sorts of animals and trying to seduce them. And what does Hera do? She sits sulking at home, knitting and getting very angry.

What happens in the great epics like the Odyssey? Odysseus goes off to war and has all sorts of adventures. As he tries to return to his homeland, he ends up being seduced and captured by various nymphs and sorceresses on various isolated islands. He is conveniently being kept away from the home hearth, and frankly, he's having a wonderful time overall.

Meanwhile, what is Penelope doing? She is sitting back at home weaving a tapestry, and then spending her nights undoing the little bit that she has managed to weave during the day.

I happened to pick up a copy of the Odyssey as a child, just as, together with my parents, I was about to leave Latvia to become a refugee, and to lose my land to yet another foreign occupying power. We were sitting there biding our time between bombing raids, and waiting to board a ship that we hoped would not get sunk by Russian torpedoes.

I was very excited about the Odyssey, because it was an adventure about somebody going off on a sea voyage, and surviving all the difficulties he encountered along the way. When I read the Odyssey at the ripe age of seven, just before setting off on my own voyage, I was fortunate not to read it as a little girl, but as a little human being.

That meant that I did not identify with silly Penelope, who was senselessly weaving and unweaving her tapestry, every day of her life for twenty long years. I identified with Odysseus. And I think it paid off.

Mind you, Odysseus returned to his homeland in a mere twenty years. It took me over half a century to return to my homeland. But I did return, and I'm glad I could do it. I am very glad to take up the challenge of being President. I feel very comfortable being President, and I feel very comfortable taking calculated risks.

After a hard day at the Castle I often go for walks along the seashore. When I assumed office it was summertime. The days are very long at that time of year, as we are located on the 57th parallel in Northern Europe, and the walks along Latvia's beautiful coastline are splendid.

Well, the Latvian autumn soon followed, and by the time I finished my working days and returned home it was pitch dark on the seashore. Nevertheless, I decided to keep up with my walks and discovered that it was wonderful indeed. You go out onto the beach and you can't see a thing. It is absolutely and totally pitch dark. Then after a while your eyes get adjusted, and as you walk along the seashore you can gradually distinguish that the water is a slightly darker shade of black than the land. You continue to walk ahead into the unknown and into total darkness. It is completely exhilarating.

That is the way I feel about being President. I also felt exhilarated when Father Christmas, or Father Frost, who is better known as Santa Claus, came down to visit Latvia from the far North. I decided to receive him as an official visitor in front of the Riga Castle. A lot of children came for the event, and after we shook hands Santa was getting ready to go off on a parade and leave the Castle vicinity.

But I was surprised at the little girl who was not looking at Santa Claus at all, even though he is a man about this tall. She came up to me and said:

Madame President, I would also like to become President some day. Tell me, how can it be done?

I think that by the time that little girl grows up, this room might one day be full of women presidents. Who knows?