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Address by H. E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the Conference on Women and Democracy at the Dawn of the New Millennium, Reykjavik, October 8-10, 1999

Your Excellency Mr. President of Iceland,
Mr. Prime Minister,
Mr. Mayor,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

May I express my gratitude to His Excellency Mr. David Oddson, the Prime Minister of Iceland, for inviting me to take part in today's Conference. It is a great honour and a personal delight to be here in Reykjavik and to participate in this very important event. I hope that during the next three days we will succeed not only in drawing public attention to women's issues, but also in launching concrete action to strengthen the role of women in democratic societies.

I take it as very symbolic that women from both sides of the former Iron Curtain are meeting here, half way between the Old World and the New. We stand here as a formidable and united force, ready to foster positive transformation in our societies.

The Conference on Women and Democracy at the Dawn of the New Millennium has become a reality because the vital voices of women all around the world have been heard and listened to. I should like to mention two great women specifically, and express my sincere appreciation to Mrs. Hillary Clinton and to US Secretary of State Mrs. Madeleine Albright, for the commendable initiative and strong personal commitment that have led us to this conference. I had the honour of meeting with both these distinguished ladies during my most recent visit to the United States less than a month ago. One of the topics that we discussed was the upcoming manifestation of Vital Voices in Reykjavik, and the importance that we all attach to this event.

As President of Latvia, I am honoured to have been chosen to speak on behalf of the three Baltic countries. I would like my voice to speak not only for the women of Latvia, but also for the women of Estonia and Lithuania.

For over 50 years, the Baltic States were wiped off the map as independent countries, and the voices of the three Baltic peoples could not be freely heard. They were silenced and cut off from the outside world by the seemingly impenetrable walls of the Iron Curtain. Our people were forced to sing in unison to words and music written for them by others.

Under the Soviet occupation, the equality of the sexes had been declared as a basic right, but was not really applied in practice. What Baltic women did gain was the privilege of doing hard labour in the Gulag, or that of engaging in the hardest and lowest paid of occupations. Women remained conspicuously absent from the highest ranks of the Communist political and economic elite.

The recovery of independence gave back their voice on the international scene to our three countries. It also opened them up to the influence of progressive ideas about women's role in society -- ideas that had been growing and developing in the West over a period of

several decades.

With the reestablishment of democracy in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, women regained the right to be heard, but their social status has not improved as quickly as many had hoped. The transition from a centralized, planned economy to a market economy and free trade has imposed severe hardships on many segments of society. Women, children, and the elderly number among those who have been most severely affected by these bloodless, yet cataclysmic social changes.

The dismantling of the totalitarian regime was, paradoxically, accompanied by the erosion of certain social safety nets. We now face the challenge of implementing new forms of sustainable state assistance to help those most in need. The task is a daunting one, and will continue to require a great deal of hard work and dedication.

The three Baltic countries would benefit greatly from increased access to Western markets and from an increased demand for our products. However, serious steps should be taken to reduce the pressures of one particular type of growing demand in Western countries. This demand has generated a dangerous and degrading trade in human flesh, which has affected not only adult women, but also children of both sexes throughout the eastern half of the European continent.

About a week ago I invited more than thirty well-known Latvian women for a discussion on women's role in Latvian society. I was inspired by the great variety of thoughts and ideas that came up on this occasion, as well as by the clear unanimity of views on certain basic and fundamental concepts. We hold that a society can be considered as truly democratic only if every citizen, regardless of sex, age, race, religion or any other distinguishing characteristic enjoys the same rights, freedoms and opportunities as any other. There should be no artificial barriers preventing women or anyone else from reaching the goals that they aspire to, including the highest positions in the land.

As I have already mentioned, the cost of economic restructuring has been hard on our countries' women. The birth rate in Latvia has been declining throughout the 1990s. Despite the wide availability of contraceptives, the number of abortions remains greater than the number of births, a very sad state of denatality. In 1994, there were 1105 legal abortions for every 1000 live births - reflecting women's economic insecurity and their lack of hope for their children's future.

Women's role as child-bearers places extra demands that sometimes require a painful choice between career and family. Or else women must reduce their investment in their careers in order to tend to their families. Family responsibilities may deprive women of the energy they require to reach the highest levels in their career fields. Women are further held back by the fact that household tasks are not always equally shared within the family.

A country's economy can flourish and remain competitive only if its women are able to contribute in a meaningful manner. Women must be able to manage both their families and their careers, and the state must make this task easier for them.

In Latvia, there are many domains of social activity in which women have already achieved complete equality. Latvia accorded women the right to vote immediately after declaring its independence in 1918. Ever since, a high proportion of women has been represented in a number of professional fields such as medicine, law, dentistry and the like. And of course, Latvia now has the first woman president in the history of Eastern and Central Europe, elected three months ago. The very fact that a woman has been democratically elected as president of one of the three Baltic countries demonstrates, I believe, the high standards our democracies have managed to reach since the recovery of independence.

Nevertheless, there still remain statistical disparities, which indicate that women have a way to go before becoming truly equal players in Latvia's educational, economic and political decision-making processes. Just to take some examples: some 62 % of Latvian

undergraduate university students are women, but among university professors only 40 out of 300 are women. Among full members of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, the proportion of women academicians is even lower. What happens to all the bright young women on the way?

Or, to take another field - women make up a majority of the employees in a number of Latvian government ministries, but only a minority of them are really high-ranking decision-makers. Here again, women are concentrated in the lowest ranks and absent or underrepresented among the highest ranks. In politics, there are 18 women against 83 men in the current Saeima or Parliament of Latvia, and the proportion of men to women in municipal and local government is roughly two to one on the average. These figures are comparable to those of many other democratic countries, and even better in some cases. But they do lag behind the great gains for women's participation in politics that have been achieved in countries like Sweden.

We must note at the same time a very encouraging trend, and this is the fact that the proportion of women in the Latvian Parliament and occupying positions at the ministerial level has been increasing. Thus the percentage of women rose from 6% to 30% in just four short years between 1995 and 1999. Women have also been entering other positions of leadership, such as banking, and have reached the highest echelons of power, including the presidencies of banks. This is a very healthy trend, which will hopefully continue and keep accelerating in the near future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite certain continuing difficulties, Latvia has become a dynamic and developing Northern European country with considerable accomplishments since regaining its independence.

But in order to successfully complete what has been started, our country still requires a large influx of wisely placed investments and support.

We would welcome assistance in the promotion of regional and infrastructural development, job creation, and loans for small and medium-sized enterprises. We are still seeking support for youth training programs, scholarships and bursaries. Training courses are essential for police officers and social workers who have daily contact with women and children in the country.

I am convinced that every dollar spent as an investment in Latvia's future will serve as an investment for the consolidation of Europe's future. Every seed planted to strengthen Latvia's economy will bring forth the fruit of preventing further social problems. It will bring forth the fruit of increasing social stability, and will help to avoid the type of social breakdown that has occurred in the Balkan region.

As the case of the Balkans sadly reveals, the costs of reconstruction following war and civil strife are far greater than the costs of prevention.

The resources of the world's women must be used more efficiently in order to promote the prosperous development of our societies. In the traditional, age-old Latvian division of labour, women played a crucial social role and were the absolute masters in their particular social and economic sectors. They were resourceful, smart, and tough. The more we provide women with an equal voice in society, the faster we will move ahead toward a just society in the next century.

I hope that these three days in Reykjavik will energize our legislators and our executives. I hope that through shared effort and that together with our media, we will strengthen the debate in our countries about the role of women in democracy. We must challenge outdated stereotypes. Women are not seeking to take control over men. They are seeking only to take control over their own lives.

I call upon this distinguished audience to continue on the path that leads from words to action. Together we must inspire our daughters and our sons!

True democracy can only exist if equal opportunities and equal rights are accorded to human beings of both sexes. Let us work together to turn a positive page as we enter a new millennium!

Thank you for your attention!