

Vital Voices Conference on Women

and Democracy  
Reykjavik, Iceland

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PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION

**Vital Voices Conference on Women and Democracy**  
**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**

**Reykjavik, Iceland**  
**October 10, 1999**

Good morning. I am delighted to be here again and to see all of you here as we conclude this important conference. It has been a pleasure being in Iceland, and it has been an honor hearing so many women's vital voices from across Northern Europe. These are the voices of education and economic opportunity; the voices of civil society and human rights; the voices of public life and political participation; the voices of democracy and freedom and progress.

I want to thank the workshop chairs and co-chairs, whom I had the pleasure of meeting with this morning, for the work they have done, for the reports they have given, and for their commitments to follow-up activities.

I am very grateful to those who spoke before me. They gave a full overview of what is possible when people come together, as we have done in this forum, with a commitment to honest dialogue, to appreciating our differences but finding common cause together, and ways to work toward the realization of our own aspirations and dreams.

It is amazing to think that just 10 years ago, this gathering would not have been possible. Many of the participants here today would not have had the freedom to talk publicly about their lives or their governments. Many would not have had the right to create NGOs or start businesses. Many, indeed, would not have had the freedom to make this journey to Iceland at all. So it is a great tribute to the many, many of you who were part of the struggle and transformation of the last 10 years—and often for many years before that—which made this moment possible.

I want to thank the women who are alumnae of other Vital Voices conferences, who have been lifting up their voices on behalf of their own aspirations and reaching out to help others along the way. I want particularly to thank the Russian delegation, which has sent a very powerful message by being here. I understand this is one of the largest Russian delegations ever to attend an international conference. And I think it is fitting that it would be this conference to which so many would come, as the transformation that is occurring in Russia is of significant consequence, not only to the Russian people, but to the entire world. And I thank the members of the Russian delegation for their leadership and their work.

I am also very grateful to the delegations of the Baltic countries. When I was in high school, I learned about Lithuania and Latvia and Estonia from people who had been forced to leave their beloved countries to seek refuge in the United States. They would often talk about their hardships, but they equally spoke of their dreams for a strong and independent future. And those dreams are certainly being realized, and it is a particular pleasure to welcome the distinguished women from the Baltic delegations—and in particular, the distinguished President of Latvia.

I want also to thank our partner, the Nordic Council, whose nations are models—many of us believe—for women's equality, not only for this region, but also throughout the entire world. And I especially want to thank our Icelandic hosts. The government and people of Iceland have done a superb job in putting together this conference, and Sigridur Duna has been a wonderful leader.

I know we are very honored today to be joined by President Grimsson and Prime Minister Oddsson, and I want to thank them for being here as well. I want to thank the students and teachers at Reykjavik Business School who opened their classrooms to us; and everyone in Iceland who seems to be extremely enthusiastic; and people who have come here from Northern Europe and have made us all feel so warmly welcome.

It is only fitting that this discussion about the next millennium take place in Iceland, a country with such a rich history and one that has a tradition of building bridges between the East and the West. During my short visit here, I've had the opportunity to see some of the history and the beauty. This unique country has not only a great past, but also such potential for the future. I saw the ancient Parliament. I stood on the deck of a wooden Viking ship that has been built for a commemorative millennial journey from Iceland to North America. I looked at some of the Icelandic Saga manuscripts, which are the heart and soul of the Icelandic experience. I learned about the central role that women have always played in the settling and building of this country.

Reading through the Sagas, I even found a new heroine, Gudridur, who grew up in Iceland at the dawn of the last millennium, and who as a young woman sailed off to America in one of those open Viking ships—one of the very first expeditions. She gave birth to the first known European child in North America, returned to Iceland and decided to take a journey to see the Pope in Rome, which she did. She returned to Iceland, where she lived to be a wise old age and where she became a very important personage and the mother of many who still live here in Iceland.

A thousand years later, as I look around this auditorium, I see many women here who have made their own courageous journeys. You may not have climbed into a wooden Viking boat and sailed across the ocean, or found your way across thousands of miles to visit a Pope—but you have. I can only imagine the courage it must have taken for Vilija to come here from Belarus—at a time when newspapers are being closed down, NGOs shut down, people disappearing—to speak, as she eloquently did yesterday, about human rights, political rights, and the future she would like to be part of in her native land. When we met recently at the White House, she had been disbarred from her legal profession because of her work on behalf of human rights. But she has not given in or given up.

And I can only imagine the commitment it must have taken for Vilija to first enter politics in Lithuania. When she spoke to us at the Vital Voices conference in Vienna two years ago, she told us how as a student of music, she wasn't even allowed to travel to a music festival in Poland. And how when she was first running for office, a famous male doctor told her that he knew quite a lot about women's hormones and could assure her that there was nothing for a woman to do in politics.

Well, thankfully, she didn't accept that diagnosis. She was elected to the Parliament, and told us in Vienna that: "The vital voices of women must break this silence."

I have met countless women, as I've traveled throughout this region in Europe and beyond, who are breaking decades and centuries of silence. I met them in Estonia, where I visited the first ever clinic offering comprehensive health care to women. I met them in Russia, where time and time again I have been so impressed by the strength and courage of the Russian women. I remember the first time I met Gallina Karelova—first in Jekaterinburg, then in Moscow, and now at this conference. Gallina is a deputy minister of Labor and Social Development, who took the unprecedented step of listening and learning from the NGOs. She has consistently hosted listening sessions with them, working with them to make sure that the government is responsive to the citizens on issues like domestic violence.

And I met women breaking the silence in Latvia, where in 1994 I met two women doctors who told me, with great emotion, that they were tired of watching children in their country die from preventable diseases. They later wrote me asking for help to improve children's health care. And one year later, Latvians and Americans met at the White House to celebrate a new partnership between a hospital in Riga and one in St. Louis.

I know each of you could stand up and tell similar stories. And each of you represents millions of other women in your countries. And each of you—and each of them—is part of a never-ending journey that women have taken to build for their societies and their families a better future, to ensure that their voices can be heard. It's a journey that continues from generation to generation, passed on to us from mothers to daughters to granddaughters. And it is a tribute to the countless women whose names we will never know—who will never have attended a conference like this—that so many have struggled so hard to keep their unique cultures, their families alive during years of great hardship, totalitarianism and communism. And it is a journey that is just as difficult—and sometimes even as dangerous—as the one that Gudridur took 1,000 years ago.

I've thought a lot about the women who are not here. In particular, I think of Gallina Staravotya from St Petersburg, Russia, who I last saw at a Vital Voices follow-up conference in Bulgaria. She came up after my speech to tell me what she was doing and the actions she was taking to further political participation and fight corruption in her country. That was the last time I saw her. Shortly after that she was assassinated. She, like many others who fight for justice and democracy, paid the ultimate price. That may be hard for those of us from Finland or Norway or Sweden or Denmark or Iceland or the United States even to imagine. But here today at the dawn of a new century—at the end of the most violent and bloody century in recorded history—people are still giving up their lives and losing all they hold dear to stand up for democracy.

A conference like this is so critical to give support to the women throughout this region and throughout the world who have borne the brunt of the changes and the suffering that has occurred during this transition on the road to reform. As we've heard during this conference, too many mothers are asking, "What good is democracy when our children don't have affordable child care or health care?" Too many

workers are asking, "What good is a free market when we're the first to be fired and the last to be hired?" And yet I also hear in all of these voices at this conference and others like it, that despite the obstacles which stand in the way, you have not lost faith and you are committed to continued reform as the way to create the positive changes that will benefit ourselves and our children in the next century. You are also committed to the idea that women will be among the leading architects and builders and champions of democracy and freedom.

The American delegation came here with two important, inter-connected goals. It is a delegation that consists of government officials headed by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, of private businesses, NGOs, philanthropic organizations, and individuals. And we are here first to strengthen our friendship with Northern Europe—to help our friends in Russia, the Baltic States and the Nordic countries create a northern neighborhood. And we are here to advance the causes of women and of democracy, because we believe that the two are inseparable. Progress for women and progress for democracy go hand in hand.

That is the promise that was made at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Platform for Action that came out of that conference very clearly stated that democratic progress depends on the progress of women. Economic progress depends on the progress of women. Women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights.

Now I have been amazed by the number of people over the last four years who asked me what I meant when I said that. I remember in particular being on a Voice of America call-in radio program when a gentleman called me from a faraway country to ask me just what I meant when I said that "women's rights are human rights." And I asked him to close his eyes and think of all the rights men have: the right to food and shelter; the right to a job and education; the right to be able to vote and to hold elective office; the right to be heard and valued as members of families and communities. Those are the same rights women want. And those are the rights we must fight for at the end of this century wherever they are still lacking.

We have worked to fulfill that promise that was made at Beijing by ensuring that women's concerns were central—not peripheral—to United States foreign policy. Secretary of State Albright has shown through words and deeds that America's international objectives include widening the circle of democracy and expanding the participation of women around the world.

One of the ways we've done that is by creating this Vital Voices Global Democracy Initiative—a public-private partnership that is dedicated to ensuring an audience for women's voices, for changing women's lives, and for transforming families, communities and societies. We are working to give women around the world the tools of opportunity. Because what does the promise of a free market mean to the millions and millions of girls who can't read or write, or to the women who can't plan their own families or their futures?

We are working to stop the trafficking of women and girls, because what does an abstract political proposition called democracy mean to the one million girls who are lured from home with the promise of jobs and security and instead wake up in a

nightmare, trafficked like drugs across national lines and sold into prostitution, domestic servitude and forced labor? I know that some of the countries and NGOs represented here have made commitments to do what they can to stop this tragedy. No government and no citizen should rest until we stop this modern form of slavery, protect its victims and prosecute those who are responsible.

And we are also working to open up the political process to all women, because democracy will never be fulfilled while women are still barred by law or tradition from making their voices heard at the ballot box or on the soapbox, in the home or the workplace. I was thinking yesterday, as we were listening to Rasha from Kuwait, that here we are in a great city with a woman mayor, and I just imagine the talent that could be put to use in Kuwait and in other countries in the Gulf region if, as Rasha asked, women were allowed to participate.

It is important at a conference like this that we hear from those who do not yet enjoy the full extent of women's rights, because we all have a stake in ensuring that they eventually do. At conferences such as this, it is the stories of women that make the greatest impression, as we meet in a workshop or in a hallway or over a cup of coffee. I have heard such voices over the past years in conferences from Vienna to Bulgaria, in Northern Ireland, in Uruguay, and now certainly here in Reykjavik.

Yesterday, a group of women, like the ones here before, sat around this beautiful table. I am told that it is shaped like a boomerang because ideas are supposed to be thrown out and bounced back. And that's what happened. We can still hear the very telling words that Rasha al Sabah left us with when she said, "We don't want a skim milk democracy. We want a full cream democracy." I can still hear Pearl Sagar from Northern Ireland saying that politics is a "playground for large children," but a playground that she loves and urges all women to join. And I can still hear Anita from CitiCorp talking about the microcredit programs in India and saying that businesses must become more involved in global philanthropy to create more cooperation, not just competition.

These are among the messages that I hope we will take back from this conference. I have looked through the reports and there are many, many recommendations to be acted upon. There are women in rural areas who desperately need computers to link them to one another, young people who need mentors, workers who need training, and women who need protection from domestic violence, as Marina reminded us of.

I want to thank all of the partners who are committed to the follow-up that will flow from this conference, starting with our long-term Vital Voices partners, McKinsey & Company and Discovery Communications, for their extraordinary commitment. I was delighted that Deputy Secretary Talbott announced the U.S. government and the Nordic Bank will provide \$2 million in microcredit to expand small businesses in Russia and the Baltics.

I also want to thank a group of Washington political consultants who will train NGOs and legislators from the region on how to advocate for issues and draft legislation. The magazine *Good Housekeeping* will create a fellowship that teaches business skills in publishing.

Akin Gump, an international law firm based in D.C., had come to this conference originally planning to offer summer associate positions to promising law students. But after meeting the women here, and hearing your stories, they have decided to also offer free targeted legal assistance to women in Russia. The Supreme Court of Iceland will train people from the Baltic States and Russia to understand their legal and judicial systems. A Swedish NGO—Women CAN—is already supporting women NGOs in Lithuania. Now working with the U.S. government and the private sector, it will offer the same type of support to women in Latvia, Belarus, and Northern Russia. And people from all over the region will be able to log onto the Internet and get information in Russian about how to start a business, thanks to our government's SBA Online Women's Business Center. I was told this morning that the Open Society Russia has committed additional resources specifically for Vital Voices implementation of the initiatives of this conference. And I very much appreciate the leadership role that the Open Society Institute has played. I hope others will join them in making this partnership a reality.

This last session of this conference has to be a beginning, not an end. All the governments involved have agreed to hold a follow-up meeting in Lithuania. When they come together, they will want to know how far we've come and how far we still must go. And what they say is dependent on what the rest of us will do.

The sponsors of this conference can open doors. But only we can walk through them. And only we can hold them open for others to follow. I am often surprised when women come to these meetings and meet their fellow countrywomen whom they've never met before, who are working in the same field or who have a good idea that they want to be part of. And they often leave here, not only with new friends, but new ideas, new networks, and new partnerships.

We could see this happening in the last few days, as women talked together and huddled together in the hallways of the Civic Center and compared notes in the classrooms of the business school—women in the cyber cafe surfing the web and sending messages home about the contacts they had made in Iceland. I hope this conversation continues—in markets and villages and boardrooms and schoolhouses, in our homes and in our parliaments. Not only among those who are here, but as many people as we can reach.

Think of the two women who addressed us earlier, Tatjana and Elena. They are here with energy and enthusiasm, which was clearly conveyed in their words. They are not alone, because they stand in the wake of many who have come before. I was told that Tatjana got a great deal of help from her grandmother and her mother, who never had the opportunities she is enjoying, but nevertheless encouraged her to follow her own dreams. Isn't that what we want for our daughters and our sons? Isn't that what this journey we are on is really all about?

At the end of the day, as we look back on an individual life, or the life of a country, we count how far we have come by many different means. We look at our accomplishments, we admire our art and our culture, we certainly enjoy the successes we might have. But perhaps the most telling way is whether, generation after generation, we have made the journey less difficult and dangerous for our children.

There are so many women who have explored new lands, risked their lives, and endured long journeys over the last millennium, all with the hope of creating a new future better than the past. That was their gift to us. Now it is up to us to give every girl growing up in the next century the chance to grow up in a world where she can travel as far as her dreams and hard work and abilities will take her. And when we do, it will be because the women in this room raised their vital voices again and again and again.

Thank you very much.