

7/11/97 Vital Voices Spch. -
Vienna, Austria

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Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Vital Voices Speech
Vienna Austria

July 11, 1997

I want to start by thanking Ambassador Hunt for her service to the United States, but more for her leadership and commitment to human rights and the work she has done here in Europe on behalf of raising voices of women so that all can hear them. I would like to thank the other conference sponsors for supporting this very important meeting. I would also like to thank the Austrian people and their government for their willingness to serve the cause of peace and democracy. Home to the United Nations and other criminal international organizations, hosts to important summits of the Cold War, haven for refugees, Austria has given the people of Europe and the world a safe place to come to so that we can hear and understand one another so that together we may shape a common future.

The conference is held in that same spirit. We are here to advance the cause of women and to advance the cause of democracy and to make it absolutely clear that the two are inseparable. There cannot be true democracy unless women's voices are heard. There cannot be true democracy unless women are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives. There cannot be true democracy unless all citizens are able to participate fully in the lives of their own country.

We have seen great progress in the region of the world. Our previous speakers this morning, from Bulgaria, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic shared with us some of the progress they have seen in their own lives, and also how they were able to take advantage of new opportunities to seek new responsibilities on behalf of themselves and to further the cause of democracy in their countries. We come at a point in time when the architecture of revolution is nearly complete in Europe. The old order is being replaced by democratic institutions and open markets, of free press, functioning parliaments, and political parties. Basic rights of assembly and association are becoming facts of life. Last month Russia joined the community of creditor nations. This week the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were invited to join NATO, and at the same time the announcement was made, it was clear that those were the first invitations, not the last invitations. Today my husband is in Poland and Romania to reiterate America's support for democracy's progress.

I think it is also significant that you are gathered here in Vienna not only to recognize both the crucial role that women have played and will play in continuing that democratic progress, but also by talking and working together to devise strategies and learn from one another about how we can continue to overcome the obstacles that still lie ahead. It is clear, I think, to all of us—to someone like me who comes from a democracy that has been working at perfecting its union for more than 220 years, and to those of you who come from much newer democracies—that democracy is very hard work. You cannot flip a switch and expect to have a democracy we dream of. In my own country we struggle every year with the challenges that are posed to democracy. We have to work very hard to make sure all of our people are given the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our democracy. We meet new challenges every day.

The work of democracy is never finished and all of us who are here today are committed to continuing that work, no matter what the obstacles we face. Even though you may have a free press or a functioning parliament, even though you may have elections that are fair and are repeated successfully, democracy depends on more than that. It depends on more than just a written constitution. It depends upon more than even economic progress. Democracy depends ultimately on whether democratic values are rooted in the hearts of men and women; whether all citizens believe that all people are entitled to be accorded the respect to which each of us as human beings should be able to demand. As a Croatian writer once said, "for every day life, revolution consists much more of the small things, of sounds, of looks and images." Even though we may look and see the institutions of democracy functioning, even though we may see the image reflected of our open markets and the progress we are making economically, we still and we always will have work to do, to make sure what Alexis de Tocqueville called "the habits of the heart" that really are at the center of a democratic institution or a democratic country, are cultivated and passed on from generation to generation.

If we look at where we are in the world today, we see that one of the sounds that is most important to ensuring that democracies take root is the sound of women's voices; those vital voices that we celebrate here. On my visits to Central and Eastern Europe, I have heard the sounds of these voices. I have heard women from many countries articulating their dreams for the world and their lives after communism. Despite the differences between them, everyone seemed to speak the same mother tongue—the language of freedom and hope.

I heard women's voices in Estonia when I visited a clinic that is the first in that country to offer a broad range of health services for women. I heard them in Romania when I met with teachers who are developing a new pedagogy that emphasizes civic participating and democratic values. I heard them in Ukraine when I met with nurses who had just started their own professional organization. I heard them in Hungary when I visited a center that is helping the minority Roma community overcome barriers to education, employment and full participation in Hungarian society. I heard them in Czech Republic when I met with leaders of non-governmental organizations who are involved in local projects to protect the rights of children and to safeguard the environment. I heard them in Belarus when I spoke with women health professionals struggling to bring quality health care to the critically ill children of Chernobyl. I heard them in Russia when I talked over the radio with listeners throughout the country on a women-owned radio station. I heard the voices of women asking, "What do we do now? We are educated; how do we use that education to be part of democracy?" And I heard them in Poland when I sat around a table with women representing different political points of view and participated in one of the most important democratic acts, disagreeing with one another respectfully, as we debated the issues that were important to us. And I heard women's vital voices in Bosnia where I was told by a teacher how she kept trying to keep her students learning despite a horrific war. I was told by health professionals of the struggles that they faced treating the wounded and that they were all committed to rebuilding their lives. You bring these voices here, these voices that I have heard, and now we must determine what we do with those voices.

Do we merely use our voice for own personal advantage? Do we take our education, do we take whatever fortunate advances we have been given at this point in history, and only work for ourselves? That is a perfectly legitimate choice. To be a successful politician, to have

power for oneself, to be a lawyer or a judge, to be a business leader, to have economic gain for oneself in a democracy—that is our choice. I hope that the vital voices represented here will do something else as well. That we will use our experience, our voices, to speak on behalf of all people, to give voice to the voiceless.

We know very well in my country and in each country represented here that there are many women who do not have the education we have. There are many women who are held down by cultural and historical traditions and are prevented from exercising the choices they might want to make. We know that there are poor people who can only dream of coming to Vienna or sitting in a hotel room looking down at Manhattan. We know, or we should know, that we ignore the needs of all our people at our peril, that part of the great challenge we face in our democracies is to be sure we create conditions for all men and women to make the choices that are right for their lives.

Women particularly have an opportunity at this point in history to express that commitment of conscience, to make clear that, yes, we want to be successful on our own, we want to be held accountable and responsible for the choices we make because we want to be seen as complete human beings. That is not all we want. We want to help create societies and a world where the opportunities for all children, young boys and young girls, are available to them in ways we could not have even dreamed a few years ago.

When we met, many of us in this room, together in Beijing we came to declare in clear and unequivocal terms that women's voices must be heard, and we offered a clear proposition that a nation's progress depends on the progress of women and that the strength of a political system depends on the inclusion of women, that the vibrancy of an economy depends on the full contribution of women; that the richness of civil society depends on the participation of women; that human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights. I have been asked what did I mean when I said that, and I have always been amazed that I would be asked such a question. I was on a Voice of America call-in program one day, and I received a call from Iran, and the speaker on the other end, a man, said that he had heard that I said that. What could I have meant? And I said, "Well, I meant what I said and if you will just shut your eyes and imagine the rights that men have, those are the rights women should have as well." The reason we want those rights is not merely to make a statement, not to be part of a political movement, but because we want our dignity to be respected as human beings, and we want to be part of building a democratic world.

We have seen changes since Beijing, here in Central and Eastern Europe. We have seen in Albania the birth of a parliamentary caucus devoted solely to issues affecting women. In Bulgaria, a non-governmental organization is teaching judges and lawyers and citizen jurors about the legal rights of women. In Ukraine, there has been a new government ministry devoted to women's affairs. In Lithuania, new services are being given to support the needs of elderly women. In Poland, we have seen created one of the largest micro-enterprise networks in the world, a new agency sponsored by the Polish and American governments and the World Bank whose sole mission is to teach women important new job skills and to help them find well-paying jobs.

And yet, despite the progress, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, since the conference in Beijing, we have a lot of work to do, because the transition from communism to free markets and democracy has created new obstacles to women's realization of their God-given potential. We have seen new stresses and sacrifices imposed on women. Throughout the region, cuts in pension and childcare, kindergartens and health care has meant that women are shouldering a double burden that was heavy enough to begin with. The oppressive structures of communism may have been torn down, but the new structures and standards necessary to advocate for women's rights and to protect women from exploitation are not yet fully constructed. The hard work of building these political, legal, and economic standards and structures must include women, and that is what you have been speaking about here. That is why this conference comes at such an important time, because it is enabling us to share these practical ideas and methods to advance the presence of women in the political, legal and business spheres.

Exchanging ideas and strategies enables us to learn from one another and take these ideas home. But that is too rare in our own world. When I am privileged to travel as I do, I always meet with groups of women for informal discussions. Whether I am in Bangladesh, Romania, Poland, Nicaragua or Chile, I find that women have much more in common than might appear on the surface. Yet I also find that even in those cities where I am meeting with women who represent the academia or the professions or business or politics, they often do not speak to one another. They sometimes do not even know one another. They are surprised to learn what the women down the street is doing to assist them in their work. We cannot build strong civil societies without working together and creating associations that enable us to make progress on the issues we care about. That is why this conference has the potential for creating new networks and associations of support within countries and between countries.

The United States government, largely through its Agency for International Development, will continue to support a broad range of programs that provide grants, training, and technical assistance to citizens to strengthen democracy at the grass roots. We want to be part of building democracy, and we especially want to be part of enabling women to participate in that process. Today we build on the commitment we have made, a commitment to local groups that are working to protect the environment, or improve health services, or spark economic development, teaching children basic democratic values; working to create that area between the market and the government that is crucial to the continuation and progress of democracy. We call that "civil society." It is only civil society that can inculcate the values of democracy, those habits of the heart. It is only through our families, our religious organizations, our associations at the civic and the neighborhood level, our trade unions, our other groups where we come together voluntarily joining in forums to create better opportunities that we will really create democracy.

The market place can do better than any other institution the work of creating wealth. But the market place, which knows the price of everything, knows the value of nothing. That is not the market place's job. The government has to preserve order, has to provide the basic services, but it cannot reach the heart. It can stir the emotions. It can, as we all know, create demagoguery, but it cannot in those very small sacred places of the heart do the work that can only be done voluntarily through civil society.

The United States Agency for International Development knows that, and that is why so much of its work has been aimed at this middle, this important part of every democratic society. Today I have the honor of announcing that the United States will commit three million dollars next year to projects that will directly support the objectives of this conference. These funds, which are entirely new funds, will be reserved solely for efforts that help women enter and ascend the realms of politics, law and business. Moreover, the United States government will continue to see to it that women have full and complete access to the entire range of democracy and business programs that we support. These efforts will supplement the work of this conference and the work that you do everyday. We know what the symptoms of inequality and oppression look like in real life. We see them when women are beaten or sold or denied credit or refused a job because of gender or passed over for promotions or treated with disrespect and not listened to. We have to do what we can to alleviate those symptoms of injustice. Yet we cannot lose sight of their root cause—disrespect for women's spirit as human beings and citizens.

Here in Vienna in 1993, leaders from around the world gathered to craft the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. This is what they called for: the universal application to women of the rights and principles with regard to equality, security, liberty, integrity and dignity of all human persons. That word, "dignity" is essentially the premise on which our democratic efforts in our respective countries will stand or fall. It is time for us as a global community to understand once and for all that we have run out of excuses.

Here we are at the end of the twentieth century, at the heart of a continent that has been scorched by war time and time again. If the history of this century teaches us anything, it is that whenever the dignity of any group is compromised by a derogation of who they are, of some essential attribute that they possess, then we leave ourselves open to having our own dignity questioned. When we do not respect the dignity of others, we do not make the dignity of any of us safe from attack. If this century has a lesson that is redeeming, it is that by extending the circle of citizenship and human dignity to include everyone without exception, we have the hope that can come to those of us who believe that by working together we can create a better life for ourselves and our children.

If we take seriously what you are talking about here at this conference, and you go home and bring the message of excitement and solidarity that you have achieved here, you will not change anything overnight. But your voice and your work, added to the inexorable, incremental steps that are necessary for change in a democracy will create the conditions for change. Then we will have a glimpse of seeing what a newsroom and a courtroom will look like with women fully participating; what the corporate board room and the political back room will consist of when women take their rightful places. We will see more clearly what can happen in the home when women are given the respect and dignity they deserve.

I am very much in awe of the stories of many of you, I can only imagine the strength that it took to have done what you have done in this audience, to join Charter 77, to march for Solidarity, to expose human rights abuses, to make freedom's voice carry over the heads of those who would silence you. I think of all this, and I ask myself how through those years of totalitarian oppression you kept your focus on what was most important in the human heart.

Perhaps the answer lies in a speech that was given in Austria seven years ago, just after the fall of communism. Part of it goes as follows:

Many of us who in recent years strove to speak the truth in spite of everything, were able to maintain an inner perspective, a willingness to endure, a sense of proportion, an ability to understand and forgive others and a light heart, only because we were speaking the truth, otherwise we might have perished from despair.

Many of you will recognize the words of President Václav Havel, talking about the totalitarian lies that recently prevailed in this part of the world and the heroic individuals like so many of you who struggled against them. Those words are just as true today, even though the burdens and obstacles are nowhere near what oppressed Europe for so many years. We know that it takes strength to keep your voice heard. We know that it takes courage to stand up for those without voices. All of you who tore down communism did so because you believed in democracy and freedom and human heart and spirit. Now you fight for women's rights because you believe in the same values. One barrier is rubble, the other is crumbling. With the strength of our commitment and the power of our voices that barrier, too, will surely fall. If we keep faith with those values that brought you to this day, if we work with one another, if we enable all of the voices of men and women who believe in freedom and hope to be heard, then the dreams that brought us here will be realized and we will be able to look back at this conference and say to ourselves, "Women's vital voices played a role in creating the kind of world I am proud to call my own."

Thank you very much.

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Mrs Clinton: I want to start by thanking Ambassador Hunt for her service to the United States, but more than for her leadership and commitment to human rights and the work she has done here in Europe on behalf of raising voices of women so that all can hear them. I would like to thank the other conference sponsors for supporting this very important meeting. And I would also like to thank the Austrian people and their government for their willingness to serve the cause of peace and democracy. Home to the United Nations and other criminal international organizations, hosts to important summits of the Cold War, haven for refugees, Austria has given the people of Europe and the world a safe place to come to so that we can hear out and understand one another so that together we may shape a common future.

This conference is held in that same spirit. We are here to advance the cause of women and to advance the cause of democracy and to make it absolutely clear that the two are inseparable. There cannot be true democracy unless women's voices are heard. There cannot be true democracy unless women are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives. There cannot be true democracy unless all citizens are able to participate fully in the lives of their country. We have seen great progress in this region of the world. Our previous speakers this morning, from Bulgaria, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic shared with us some of the progress they have seen in their own lives. How they were able to take advantage of new opportunities to seek new responsibilities on behalf of themselves and to further

MRS. CLINTON: Anything we can do to create good opportunities for girls and women, I think, will benefit many, many women. But I also believe that in many different societies for different reasons, an individual woman's chances for pursuing her own dreams will be enhanced if other women work together to change social, historical, and cultural conditions that hold women back. There are many women who have attained a good education and then are told that they cannot succeed in the area they wish to work in for artificial reasons. So the individual woman has to do what she can to prepare herself, but then as part of our vital voices we have to make it possible for every woman to be able to pursue whatever her ambitions or dreams might be. I also think there is another element, and that is the sort of psychological barriers that are the internal barriers to many women's success. Women who feel that they are not entitled to pursue their own dreams. Women who feel that, if they make a choice to pursue an education or to pursue a job, they are making a choice not to pursue family or relationships. So I think we have to enable women to feel that they can attain that balance between work and family that is so difficult in all societies, which many of us have worked on for many years, and support young women so that they feel comfortable making these choices.

QUESTION: There's a lot of violence on TV in America, which also influences our cultures. What can you do to stop it?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I agree with that. I deplore the violence that is depicted on American television and in American movies, and we -- my husband and the Vice-President and Mrs. Gore and I -- have worked very hard over the last several years within the system that we have, which is a not only a free and open-market place of ideas, but with our first amendment to the Constitution, we have very broad protections for anything that is characterized as speech, which most television programs and movies are. And you may have heard that just two weeks ago, our United States Supreme Court struck down a law that the Congress had passed and the President had signed, trying to limit pornography on the Internet in the United States. So they take a very broad view of what is protected under our Constitution. So, within a limit, we have tried to do several things. The President has advocated that a computer chip be built into new televisions so that programs can be blocked out by parents exercising authority over their television set, so that the television set can be programmed in such a way that certain stations and programs cannot be seen. So, that will work for younger children, but then we know older children will spend their time figuring out how to break the system, but at least, you know, for a few years parents will have the illusion of control over their children again, and even an illusion in these circumstances is comforting to some extent. And we've also worked with the television to create labels for television programs, so that parents can make better decisions about what they permit their children to watch. And finally, we have encouraged the entertainment industry to create different kinds of programs. Now, I think having said all that, I am not hopeful about being able to limit the violence on American television or in American movies. We have too much freedom that is given for good reason to be able to prevent that. And it sells, unfortunately. People watch it. It's like driving by an automobile accident. You know you shouldn't, but you slow down and you look and are interested and stimulated by such programs. So we are doing what we can from the governmental level. In my book "It Takes A Village," I urged parents and other citizens to boycott certain programs, not to buy the products that are advertised on programs, to use citizen action to make a statement about what programs should or should not be seen on our television. But I think that many of you in countries with different legal systems will have to be working very hard to try to create a situation in which you are not flooded by the most violent television programming from our culture, and I continue to try in the United States both to limit it and to get citizens and especially parents to exercise more authority with children and to try to limit the effect of it. I think it is one of our most serious problems because it is part of the conflict that is developing between "are we creating in our society citizens or consumers," and it is a very difficult problem.

QUESTION: Speaking of your book, I liked your book about raising children. Do you agree that women should emphasize our central role in the family even as we advocate our rights?

MRS. CLINTON: I do, because I am very committed to family and to my particular obligations as wife and mother, but I don't think every woman has to become a wife and a mother. If we are talking about democracy, it is very important to make clear that women should have a range of choices. There are women who wish to be full-time mothers and commit themselves to that task. That should be a respected choice. There are women who do not choose to marry, or if they marry, do not choose to have children. That should be a respected choice. So, the vast majority of women in our countries will try to do both, as I have and as most of you have, to have a family and to have work that is important and meaningful to me. That balancing act that we're all engaged in must also be respected and more support must be given to women who are attempting to do that. But the larger point I would make beyond individual women's choices and being respected for these choices, is that whether or not we make any of these choices, every one of us has an obligation to do what we can to make sure our children are well raised, and that our children have the health care, the education, the safety, stability, and all the conditions that will enable them to grow to their own potential. So, whether or not a person is a parent, or however many children a person has, every one of us will be affected in the quality of our life by how our children and the next generation are treated. So, I think that goes beyond the individual choice, and keeping the importance of raising children central to our political and economic and social consideration is not just a family's responsibility, it is the entire society's responsibility.

AMB. HUNT: Before I ask you the last question and ask you to close your remarks with that question, I want to thank you personally for coming, and I want to tell you that this conference, which has been hugely successful, would not have happened without some very generous help from organizations like Bank Austria, Austrian Airlines which flew about 160 people here, Nestle Corporation, the U.S. Government, the European Union, the Soros Foundation, and a host of others. And I know that you are as impressed as I am with their generosity, too. If you could just say two sentences about the key question of this conference: What can Americans learn from our experience as Eastern and Central Europeans? What can Americans learn from Central and Eastern Europeans?

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you, whoever asked that question. Because I think there is a great deal that Americans can learn from your experiences. I think, first, that it takes courage and perseverance to both win and keep a democracy, that the building of a democracy is an ongoing challenge and struggle, and that we can never take it for granted. And that many of you in this room and in the countries from which you come, have a much clearer idea of the importance of the values that underlie democracy than many people in my country do today. Because we have many people who have gotten very complacent in the United States. They don't take the trouble to vote. They don't defend the freedoms that we have fought for, and people in previous generations have died for. So, maybe it is a good thing that a society gets to the point of the United States and many of the European countries, where freedom is so ingrained in the fabric of life that we don't have to worry about it or fight over it any more. I think there's always a danger when people become complacent, because there's always the risk that demagogues and authoritarians will assert themselves and influence the minds of people and take over the political and economic structures again. So that is one important thing. The second point I would make is this struggle that I referred to earlier, in the new global economy, in the Information Age in which we are living, how do we live as human beings? How do we ensure that we are able to deal with the enormous number of choices that we have? Many of you came from countries where under communism, you had no choices. Now in many countries we have so many choices that people are often bewildered about what is the right choice that they should be making. How do we create the right conditions, the balance between government and the marketplace, a balance of power that will create jobs and good

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If we look at where we are in the world today, we see that one of the sounds that is most important to ensuring that democracies take root is the sound of women's voices, those vital voices that we celebrate here. On my visits to Central and Eastern Europe, I have heard the sounds of those voices. I have heard women from many countries articulating their dreams for the world and their lives after communism. Despite the differences between them, everyone seemed to speak the same mother tongue -- the language of freedom and hope. I heard women's voices in Estonia when I visited a clinic that is the first in that county to offer a broad range of health services for women. I heard them in Romania when I met with teachers who are developing a new pedagogy that emphasizes civic participation and democratic values. I heard them in Ukraine when I met with nurses who had just started their own professional organization. I heard them in Hungary when I visited a center that is helping the minority Roma community overcome barriers to education, employment and full participation in Hungarian society. I heard them in the Czech Republic when I met with leaders of non-governmental organizations who are involved in local projects to protect the rights of children and to safeguard the environment. I heard them in Belarus when I spoke with women health professionals struggling to bring quality health care to the critically ill children of Chernobyl. I heard them in Russia when I talked over the radio with listeners throughout the country on a women-owned radio station. I heard the voices of women asking "what do we do now? We are educated; how do we use that education to be part of democracy?" And I heard them in Poland when I sat around a table with women representing different political points of view and participated in one of the most important of democratic acts, disagreeing with one another respectfully,

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Do we merely use our voice for our own personal advantage? Do we take our education, do we take whatever fortunate advances we have been given at this point in history, and only work for ourselves? That is a perfectly legitimate choice. To be a successful politician, to have power for oneself, to be a lawyer or a judge, to be a business leader, to have economic gain for oneself in a democracy -- that is our choice. But I hope that the vital voices represented here will do something else as well. To use our experience, our voices, to speak on behalf of all people, to give voice to the voiceless. Because we know very well in my country and in each country represented here that there are many women who do not have the education we have. There are many women who are held down by cultural and historical traditions, prevented from exercising the choices they might want to make. We know there are poor people who can only dream of coming to Vienna or sitting in a hotel room looking down at Manhattan. And we know, or we should know, that we ignore the needs of all our people at our peril, that part of the great challenge we face in our democracies is to be sure we create conditions for all men and women to make the choices that are right for their lives. And women particularly have an opportunity at this point in history to express that commitment of conscience, to make clear that, yes, we want to be successful on our own, we want to be held accountable and responsible for the choices we make because we want to be seen as full human beings. But that is not all we want, we do want to help create societies and a world where the opportunities for all children, young boys and young girls, are available to them in ways we could not have even dreamed a few years ago.

When we met, many of us in this room, together in Beijing we came to declare in clear and unequivocal terms that women's voices must be heard, and we offered a clear proposition that a nation's progress depends on the progress of women, that the strength of political system depends on the inclusion of women. That the vibrancy of an economy depends on the full contribution of women. That the richness of civil society depends on the participation of women. That human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights. And I have been asked what did I mean when I said that. And I have always been amazed that I would be asked such a question. I was on a Voice of America call-in program one day, and I received a call from Iran, and the speaker on the other end, a man, said that he had heard that I said that. What could I have meant? And I said, "Well, I meant what I said and if you will just shut your eyes and imagine the rights that men have, those are the rights women should have as well." And the reason we want those rights is not merely to make a statement, not to be part of a political movement, but because we want our dignity to be respected as human beings, and we want to be part of building a democratic world.

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And yet, despite the progress, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, since the conference in Beijing, we have a lot

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of work to do. Because the transition from communism to free markets and democracy has created new obstacles to women's realization of their God-given potential. We have seen new stresses and sacrifices imposed on women. Throughout the region, cuts in pension and childcare, kindergartens and health care has meant that women are shouldering a double burden that was heavy enough to begin with. The oppressive structures of communism may have been torn down, but the new structures and standards necessary to advocate for women's rights and to protect women from exploitation are not yet fully constructed. The hard work of building these political, legal, and economic standards and structures must include women, and it is what you have been speaking about here. That is why this conference comes at such an important time, for it is enabling us to share practical ideas and methods to advance the presence of women in the political, legal and business spheres. Exchanging ideas and strategies enables us to learn from one another and take these ideas home. But that is too rare in our own world. When I am privileged to travel as I do, I always meet with groups of women for informal discussions. Whether I am in Bangladesh, Romania, Poland, Nicaragua or Chile, I find that women have much more in common than might appear on the surface. And yet I also find that even in those cities where I am meeting with women who represent the academia or the professions or business or politics, they often do not speak to one another. They sometimes do not even know one another. They are surprised to learn what the woman down the street is doing to assist them in their work. We cannot build strong civil societies without working together and creating associations that enable us to make progress on the issues we care about. That is why this conference has the potential for creating new networks and associations of support, within countries and between countries.

The United States government, largely through the Agency for International Development, will continue to support a broad range of programs that provide grants, training, and technical assistance to citizens to strengthen democracy at the grass roots. We want to be part of building democracy, and we especially want to be part of enabling women to participate in that process. Today we build on the commitment we have made, a commitment to local groups that are working to protect the environment, or improve health services, or spark economic development, teaching children basic democratic values. Working to create that area between the market and the government which is crucial to the continuation and progress of democracy. We call that "civil society." And it is only civil society that can inculcate the values of democracy, those habits of the heart. It is only through our families, our religious organizations, our associations at the civic and the neighborhood level, our trade unions, our other groups where we come together voluntarily joining in forums to create better opportunities that we will really create democracy. The market place can do better than any other institution the work of creating wealth. But the market place, which knows the price of everything, knows the value of nothing. That is not the market place's job. The government has to preserve order, has to provide the basic services, but it cannot reach the heart. It can stir the emotions. It can, as we all know, create demagoguery, but it cannot in those very small sacred places of the heart do the work that can only be done voluntarily through the civil society. And so the United States Agency for International Development knows that, and that is why so much of its work has been aimed at this middle, this important part of every democratic society. And today I have the honor of announcing that the United States will commit three million dollars next year to projects that will directly support the objectives of this conference. These funds, which are entirely new funds, will be reserved solely for efforts that help women enter and ascend the realms of politics, law and business. Moreover, we will continue to see to it that women have full and complete access to the entire range of democracy and business programs that we support. These efforts will supplement the work of this conference and the work that you do everyday. We know what the symptoms of inequality and oppression look like in real life. We see them when women are beaten or sold or denied credit or refused a job because of gender or passed over for promotions or treated with disrespect and not listened to. But we have to do what we can to alleviate those systems, those symptoms of injustice. And yet we cannot lose sight of their root cause — disrespect for women's spirit as human beings and citizens.

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Here in Vienna in 1993, leaders from around the world garnered to craft the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. This is what they called for, the universal application to women of the rights and principles with regard to equality, security, liberty, integrity and dignity of all human persons. That word dignity is essentially the premise on which our democratic efforts in our respective countries will stand or fall. It is time for us as a global community to understand once and for all, we have run out of excuses. Here we are at the end of the twentieth century, at the heart of a continent that has been scorched by war time and time again. If the history of this century teaches us anything, it is that whenever the dignity of any group is compromised by a derogation of who they are, of some essential attribute that they possess, then we leave ourselves open to having our own dignity questioned. Where we do not respect the dignity of others, we do not make the dignity of any of us safe from attack. If this century has a lesson that is redeeming, it is that by extending the circle of citizenship and human dignity to include everyone without exception, we have the hope that can come to those of us who believe that by working together we can create a better life for ourselves and our children. If we take seriously what you are talking about here at this conference, and you go home and bring the message of excitement and solidarity that you have achieved here, you will not change anything overnight. But your voice and your work, added to the inexorable, incremental steps that are necessary for change in a democracy will create the conditions for change. And then we will have a glimpse of seeing what a newsroom and a courtroom will look like with women fully participating. What the corporate board room and the political back room will consist of when women take their rightful places. We will see more clearly what can happen in the home when women are given the respect and dignity they deserve.

I am very much in awe of the stories of many of you, I can only imagine the strength that it took to have done what you have done in this audience, to join Charter 77, to march for Solidarity, to expose human rights abuses, to make freedom's voice carry over the heads of those who would silence you. I think of all this, and I ask myself how you kept your focus through those years of totalitarian oppression on what was most important in the human heart. Perhaps the answer lies in a speech that was given in Austria seven years ago, just after the fall of communism. Part of it goes as follows:

"Many of us who in recent years strove to speak the truth in spite of everything, were able to maintain an inner perspective, a willingness to endure, a sense of proportion, an ability to understand and forgive others and a light heart, only because we were speaking the truth, otherwise we might have perished from despair."

Many of you will recognize the words of President Havel, talking about the totalitarian lies that recently prevailed in this part of the world and of the heroic individuals like so many of you who struggled against them. Those words are just as true today, even though the burdens and obstacles are nowhere near what oppressed Europe for so many years. But we know that it takes strength to keep your voice heard. We know that it takes courage to stand up for those without voices. All of you who tore down communism did so because you believed in democracy and freedom and the human heart and spirit. Now you fight for women's rights because you believe in the same values. One barrier is rubble, the other is crumbling. With the strength of our commitment and the power of our voices that barrier, too, will surely fall. If we keep faith with those values that brought you to this day, if we work with one another, if we enable all of the voices of men and women who believe in freedom and hope to be heard, then the dreams that brought us here will be realized and we will be able to look back at this conference and say to ourselves "Women's vital voices played a role in creating the kind of world I am proud to call my own." Thank you very much.

Question and Answer Session after the First Lady's Speech at the Vital Voices Conference July 11, 1997

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incomes and economic opportunities, but will also provide support for people in a social safety act and will create an environment in which the marketplace does not determine everything. So, as you are struggling to make those choices, we in the United States will be watching you and supporting you, and together I hope that we will enter into the twenty-first century with a much clearer understanding of and commitment to those basic democratic values that we have worked on for so many years, but that you now hold as a trust for the rest of us. Because how you deal with democracy's new challenges will affect the United States and the entire world.

(End transcript)