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PRESERVATION**

**Vital Voices Reception
The White House
2/15/00**

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Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

The White House
February 15, 2000

Thank you, and welcome to the White House for this celebration of Vital Voices.

It's amazing to remember that Vital Voices started in 1997 at a conference in Vienna, Austria, that brought women together from all over Central and Eastern Europe as part of the commitment that the President and I and Secretary Albright made to improving the status of women, and their advancement worldwide, in American foreign policy for the first time. And the person who put it together for us was our then ambassador, Swanee Hunt, whom I am pleased is here today. Swanee, thank you.

Swanee and I well remember a woman from Lithuania who got up and talked about 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 and others didn't accept that diagnosis. She was elected to Parliament and challenged us in Vienna to ensure that, "The vital voices of women must break this silence." Today we are honored to be joined by a group of extraordinary women who are breaking literally centuries of silence all over the world. They are vital voices from Russia, Haiti, India, Ghana, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Colombia, Kuwait, Tajikistan, Ireland and the United States. These women have come together for this conference and to continue the work of Vital Voices. And I would like to salute each and every one of them.

These women leaders are the vital voices of women in public life. They are voices against violence and corruption. They are voices of economic empowerment and social justice. They are the voices of peace and democracy. They are the vital voices of progress.

And they have come here to learn from one another, and find new ways to meet our common challenges. I know that they've already had a wonderful time together at Airlie House, and they have an exciting schedule ahead of them, including joining Secretary Albright for a roundtable discussion at the State Department, meetings at the Department of Justice, Congress, the World Bank and the Chamber of Commerce.

I want to thank, particularly, Theresa Loar, and the President's Interagency Council on Women. Theresa, where are you? Thank you. And thanks to Joan Winship and the Stanley Foundation, Discovery Communications, McKinsey and Company and the many other partners who have made all of this possible.

Just before this event started, I had a chance to meet briefly with the women who are here and I heard about the retreat that they've had over the past few days with many of you who are

gathered here in the State Dining Room. I know that the conversations were not only formal discussions that were planned, but they continued in hallways and during breaks and even late into the night.

One group that included representatives from Russia, Ukraine, Cambodia, and India started a conversation about trafficking which went on for hours and hours late into the evening. Many had horror stories to share about how women and girls were being lured away from their countries with the promise of economic opportunity, shipped like drugs by an international criminal network, and sold into modern slavery. Others talked about what it's like to be a destination country, home to the sweatshops, prostitution rings, and domestic bondage that steal the freedom and dignity of women and girls.

What became clear during that dialogue is that this is a global problem; that the United States and every country has a role to play; and that many of the solutions were not further away than the ideas and experiences of the woman sitting next to you. It was that way with every issue. And that's why Vital Voices is so important—especially now.

It is no secret that, today, democratic progress, economic progress, and social progress all depend on the progress of women and girls. No country can move ahead if its girls and women are left behind. And so, when we created Vital Voices three years ago, we knew that it was in America's self-interest to do everything we could to enhance the opportunities and progress for women and girls, and to provide the tools of opportunity to all women, especially in the many places where democracy, free markets, and peace are finally within reach.

Some of the women here attended one of the training sessions, conferences, and roundtables we've held, from Vienna to Montevideo, Belfast, Palermo, Reykjavik and Istanbul. These events have brought together women from more than 80 countries.

I have been especially moved by these particular encounters. I once sat at a table in Central America with women who represented both sides of a recently bloody civil war, who were now sitting down together to talk about what they could do to make peace not only real but lasting.

I met with women who were from the former Soviet Union who were now starting their own businesses, creating NGOs, and doing the everyday work of democracy. Many of the women who come to Vital Voices come with a mission, but often without the tools to be able to further that mission.

I think of Nasri, who worked in Somalia to convince young militias to turn over their weapons in exchange for education and training. She told us what she wanted was better opportunities for women and their daughters, and that she wanted to work collectively in Somalia with women she could meet all over the world through Vital Voices.

I think of the women from Northern Ireland I have worked with who have been activists in the peace process. We created an opportunity for women to come from both traditions to talk

about what they had in common for the very first time. There are so many women who, in Northern Ireland today, are members of Vital Voices.

I think of the women from Haiti who have participated. In particular, Jocelyn, who is now a cabinet member. She said that before she never would have run for office, but after hearing the stories of other women, she was willing to come forward.

These stories can be repeated time and time again, but our challenge now is to make sure that those stories continue to be heard and motivate women all over the world. That's the goal of the Vital Voices Global Partnership. This new non-profit organization is being created by the private sector to enhance the work of Vital Voices and continue to make sure those voices are heard well into this century. We've identified critical needs. We know that women need skills training in everything from communication advocacy to business. They need opportunities—both electronically and in person—to network and share information, and to develop strategies together. They need help changing laws—and changing attitudes. They need partners to help raise their voices, and I am so grateful for all the private sector partners who are here.

I know that the real work that is being done with Vital Voices is not happening here in Washington, but is happening around the world. And I have someone here who I wish to introduce you to, who has made such a difference already in Russia. She has been a part of Vital Voices for quite some time, is a pioneer of all women leaders in Russia, and she is president of the Open Society Institute. And I am told she has a very exciting announcement to make today. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Ekaterina Geniyeva.

[Dr. Ekaterina Geniyeva speaks.]

Thank you so much. Your words and your commitment are a tangible reminder of what can be done and I have every confidence that the ball will be caught.

It is now my pleasure to introduce Dr. Lubna Al-Kazi, someone who has been a strong advocate for democracy and woman's suffrage in her country, Kuwait. I know that many of you know that the Emir had a strong commitment to women's suffrage, but the bill to grant women the vote was lost by two votes in the Kuwaiti Parliament. But with leaders like Dr. Lubna Al-Kazi and other women that have been on the front lines, we are confident that that vote next year will be successful. So please join me in welcoming Dr. Al-Kazi.

[Dr. Al-Kazi speaks.]

Thank you all. And I especially want to thank all of the ambassadors who are here representing the countries of the women who are part of the Vital Voices conference and mission. I thank you all for supporting this effort, particularly the private sector partners who have made this possible, and as I look around the room, so many prominent Administration officials who have believed in it and supported it time and time again, which I am personally very grateful for.

Vital Voices will continue. It will move and expand in every way that we can help it to. It will now have a permanent home, we hope, in a not-for-profit organization that will continue this movement that began just three years ago. We know how vital it is that women such as yourselves, who are leaders, had a chance to demonstrate—clearly within your own countries, as well as around the world—what really matters in promoting and advancing progress for women.

I now invite you all to come and meet our Vital Voices participants, enjoy the refreshments, and thank you so much for being so supportive of what this is about. Thank you all.