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Raising Their Voices: Women in the New Democracies

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"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. "

-United States First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

"We, the women from the Civic Alliance and from women's ,organiza- tions... were the first to organize such public events as early asj 991.. rock concerts, marches, lighting candies for all of the victims ofwuu, bringing flowers to the door of the federal Parliament, wearing symbolic yellow patches. Non-violence is inherent in women's expression. "

-Vesna Pesic, President, Civic Alliance of Serbia

"They tell me that what I am supposed to do is tell you women who come from the newly democratic countries of the East why it is important that you participate in the political arena. It is more than important, it is vital. "

- Susanna Agnelli, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Italy

"Thanks to the work of various women in various segments of society, the realities of women's lives and respect for women's rights have been brought to light... The time has come to transform these realities into laws-laws that will be implemented with consistency, and respected by the gender-sensitive, educated public. "

*-Marina Skrabalo, Coordinator, Miramida Plus! Program;
Center for Peace Studies, Zagreb*

Women are playing an integral role in the dual transition to democratic and market economy societies in Central and Eastern Europe. That was the common message of voices raised at the *Vital Voices: Women in Democracy* conference held in Vienna, Austria, from July 9-11, 1997. Many women from the East are at the forefront of change, pushing their governments for democratic reforms, organizing grassroots movements to aid people injured by the tectonic political shift, and creating flourishing new enterprises in uncertain economic times. Ambassador Eleanor Roosevelt pointed out to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly 45 years ago that "too often the great

decisions are originated and given form in bodies... so completely dominated by [men] that whatever of special value women have to offer is shunted aside without expression..." The voices raised at the conference nearly half a century later made it clear: what women have to offer are essential elements to the infrastructure of political, legal and economic stability.

Waiting in the Wings

Despite the immense potential of women's contributions, and despite the democratic promises inherent in the political sea changes in 1989, there is still a prevailing tendency in the post-Communist countries not to make use of women's talents. While politically active at the grassroots and local levels, women in the new democracies are grossly underrepresented in high-level government posts and in parliaments. In the massive reorganizations following the implosion of Communist systems, rubber-stamp political bodies disappeared, quota systems were removed, and the last trappings of the pretense of adequate representation fell away. The largest setbacks for women in politics have been in the former Soviet states and Eastern Europe, where representation has plunged from highs of between 25 percent and 35 percent during Communism, to as low as four percent, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Clearly, women's voices were not integral in policy-making before the transition. But in a sad irony, as a new chapter of freedom is being written, women find themselves often confined to the margins, their voices muted.

Beyond politics, while the passage of new laws and the restructuring of constitutions have provided guarantees of basic human rights, governments often fail to enforce laws that provide women legal protections. This discounting of women contributes to lawlessness, as well as *vice versa*. For example, trafficking in women is fueling organized crime, creating a sinister new East-West link, as traffickers enjoy an endless market, enormous profits, minimal punishments, and little risk of getting caught. A distressing unexceptional case is a shipyard clerk recruited for a higher-paying job as a waitress in Germany. She turned her passport over to her recruiter, who then photographed her being raped and threatened to send the photographs to her devout mother in Gdansk. She was one of an estimated eight thousand Polish prostitutes in Frankfurt alone shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain. This violence against women is not solely an issue of justice; societies cannot honestly support women as builders of the new economies while tolerating a market in which they are regarded as commodities.

In addition to these political and legal concerns, women face heavy barriers in the economic sphere: diminishing labor market access, the feminization of poverty, gender-based layoffs, lower pay and meager career opportunities. In Russia, women's wages slipped from 70 percent of men's in 1989, to 40 percent in 1995; and in most sectors women are the last hired and the first fired. In Slovakia, although a greater number of women were university graduates, between 1989 and 1993 women earned just over half of men's wages.

The transition to capitalism has been difficult for most, but especially for women~ and the slower the economic growth, the more severe is women's disadvantage. In

countries experiencing more difficult transitions, the gap between men and women is greatest. In Ukraine, women comprise 70 percent of the unemployed, with the trend sharply worsening. The underlying rationale was distilled in 1993 by Russian Labor Minister Melikyan: "Why should we employ women when men are out of work?" Even in spite of such seemingly insurmountable obstacles, there is a growing consensus that the business potential of women is an underrated and overlooked economic miracle waiting to happen.

At Center Stage

Vital Voices: Women in Democracy convened more than three hundred women leaders from governmental and nongovernmental sectors of Central and Eastern Europe, the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) from July 9-11, 1997, in Vienna, Austria. Participants defined ways to strengthen the role of women in developing democratic societies and constructed concrete strategies to change their societies. The conference supported President Bill Clinton's and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's commitment to expand the circle of democracy by catapulting women into the mainstream of American foreign policy.

The theme of moving from the silencing of women's voices to their amplification echoed throughout the conference center and was underscored by presentations from high-level public figures. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered the keynote speech to an audience of one thousand women bussed in from neighboring countries and announced the United States Government's commitment of \$3 million to support the outcomes of the conference. Susanna Agnelli, former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, moved the participants with a brutally honest account of her life in politics. Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, President of the National Bank of Poland, and former Prime Minister of Lithuania, Kazimira Prunskiene, provided clear descriptions of the challenges they faced in Eastern Europe.

Elizabeth Rehn, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, recounted how during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, even "in the face of evil and utter cowardice, women stood up, determined to survive and to protect their families." Jaroslava Moserova, Vice President of the Czech Senate, startled the participants with her description of the "zoo-syndrome" in post-Communist states, where the predators are the first ones out of the cages. And, US Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor urged the women of Eastern Europe to seize the "unparalleled opportunity" to lay the groundwork for gender equality. One after the other, women leaders took to the stage to share their life experiences and their ideas on how women can shape the future.

But the driving energy of the conference flowed from a series of small focus group meetings in which women from a wide variety of backgrounds shared experiences and helped each other develop strategies. To highlight issues of great concern to women in the new democracies, focus groups were in three separate tracks: "Politics and Persuasion;" "Law and Leadership;" and, "Business and Beyond." Each of the tracks

produced action- oriented plans to start businesses, work with the media, use the Internet, run for political office, draft legislation, invest in a free market and write grant proposals. Hundreds of success stories, models and approaches were shared among the women as they debated strategic approaches to seemingly intractable problems.

Encore!

A conference is only an event. But the voices raised during the three days in Vienna have been reverberating since July 11th, reaching from Los Angeles to Kiev. Each day that passes, the chorus is growing stronger and getting louder, invigorated as ideas are trans- formed into action. The real work is now underway as individuals and delegations apply the strategies developed at the conference.

Participants are now building on the linkages made in Vienna. Representatives from numerous US embassies in Eastern Europe have since met with delegations to the conference to promote implementation. Hundreds of letters have been received from conference participants 36 countries, reporting enthusiastically how they are moving towards joint projects, programs and networks. The women at the conference have now taken over the process, putting together country plans, meetings, articles, courses, Web sites, civic demonstrations. . . whatever it takes to make sure their voices are heard at home and abroad. There is no doubt that the impact of those voices and actions will have a greater role in shaping the future of both democratic and economic life in Central and Eastern Europe.

Are we listening?

The path to the *Vital Voices* conference crossed continents. wound through networks and international organizations, and found its way to a broad base of support. It provided a unique opportunity to build trust. cross divides, share dreams and negotiate the pragmatic solutions which are now being transformed into realities.

But, we must continue to encourage these bold women leaders in Eastern Europe as they work to develop strong, sustainable democracies. As Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright said in a statement to the *Vital Voices* participants: .. As we approach the new century, we know we cannot build the kind of future we want without the contributions of women. And we know that, in this region and around the world, women will only be able to contribute to our full potential if we have equal access, equal rights, equal protection and a fair chance at the levers of economic and political power. Advancing the status of women is the right thing to do~ and, frankly, it is the smart thing to do."

And why? In many countries, change has bred tremendous social upheaval as well. Civil wars and showcase democracy have taken their toll on the lives of many citizens, but especially on women. But, even in dangerous situations, women continue to stitch the fabric of torn societies back together. For example, during the war, Bosnian women formed some 40 women's associations. Throughout the new democracies they have led in the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the building blocks of civil society; in the Czech Republic 84 percent are headed by women.

There are concrete steps the United States is taking to contribute to the advancement of women worldwide. For example, the US is sharpening its focus on indigenous women's economic enterprises. The US Government can ensure that entrepreneurial education is directed to women, such as the management training received by about 70 Russian women running former state farms, and 5,000 women dairy farmers in Albania, funded through the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Credit is critical too. With a 98 percent return rate, micro-loans for women are an extremely efficient way to support women and restore damaged economies. An example is the Bosnian Women's Initiative—a \$5 million fund—bolstering business ventures of women in all three ethnic groups. The grant program has already helped to increase the economic, social, and political role of women in the war-torn region. But, those funds now need to be replenished and augmented.

Economic know-how is not sufficient to raise women's status, however. The social expectations of women as sole domestic caretakers also must be addressed. In the area of crime, we must continue to harmonize national and international policies and legislation to protect women and their families. Similarly, as we back democratic institutions such as free media, independent judiciaries, free markets, NGOs, and multi-party elections, our support should specifically target the advancement of women as journalists, judges, investors, entrepreneurs, NGO leaders and office seekers.

Political leaders of America are joining women throughout the world, calling on governments, parliaments, and business leaders to recognize the inherent value of women as a resource for political, legal and economic stability. In the US, they are calling on the Congress, the State Department, the Commerce Department, the business community, the NGO sector, and the people of America to work with them as they strive to secure peace, freedom and prosperity not just for some, but for all global citizens.

Examples abound of women not only finding their voices but amplifying them in post-Communist Europe, and what they are calling for is nothing less than a just and humane society. As women echo our own American values, it is in the United States' interest to raise their voices.