

**ADDRESS BY H.E. SOLVITA ĀBOLTIŅA,
SPEAKER OF THE PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA
AT THE HIGH LEVEL EVENT
WOMEN ENHANCING DEMOCRACY : BEST PRACTICES
SESSION A: WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE**

VILNIUS, 30 JUNE 2011

President Dalia Grybauskaitė,
President Tarja Halonen,
Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honor to address you here today and to have an opportunity to share views about women's complex role in the contemporary world.

No doubt, that all participants of this distinguished audience appreciate that the role of genders is changing and differences between genders still exist but diminish.

We live in the society whose past was characterized by gender as an indicator for setting different rights and restrictions – both formal and informal.

Since the middle of the 20th century, more and more women have been entering the labour market in the Western world. This has led to changes in the model of family along with the growing women's economic independence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Representing Latvia as the Speaker of the Parliament, allow me shortly to dwell on our national experience.

Some weeks ago we awarded the Reputation Prize to the best business leaders in Latvia. Among the TOP 10 entrepreneurs there were 5 outstanding Latvian women who can be characterized as well-educated, persuasive and socially responsible business leaders.

The European Commission's research also shows that Latvia occupies the high third place in the European Union in the percentage of women leading business. These women are highly appreciated and respected in my country. Their contribution is important for the well-being and sustainability of our nation. And why so? I believe that it is because women use power not for ruling but for serving the society.

These are women with rich experience, eager to meet challenges and ready to take responsibility not only for business track records but also for employees and their families, and their well-being.

This is especially important for us in this period when Latvia has come through the global financial and economic crisis and strives hard to return to the path of development and to make the national economy more competitive. And it seems that we are succeeding.

Statistically, gender equality looks good in Latvia – women make up to 30% of employers, 50% of Supreme Court judges, more than 30% of rectors or presidents of higher education institutions, and 19% of elected members of parliament.

But this statistical data does not mean that it is time to celebrate. Stereotypes and prejudices about woman's role still exist.

In Latvia, women build one half of the society; nevertheless women are in the minority in the parliament elected by the same society. In the eyes of a great part, our primary place still is home, children and kitchen. We are inconvenient employees because our children fall ill. To the best advantage women professionally are employable as nurses, teachers, shop-assistants and psychologists.

In other words, women have to withstand double-stress: they have to be good mothers and well-looking but at the same time constructive and professional.

Such prejudices about gender and justice, and so-called gender roles have to be erased. And let me express my strong belief that such changes cannot be reached with the help of restrictive mechanisms and quotas. Democracy and justice starts in our educated and free minds.

I share the view that the main milestone for women's expanded future role and economic independence is education and knowledge. It unlocks our potential and opens our minds.

Allow me to stress that differences between genders can be removed only by changing the way of thinking, by changing the social environment and general attitude towards women's economic, social and political activity. I myself have a family and two children, and I have been in politics for many years. Every day and every hour I try to prove with my work that a woman can be successful both as a political leader and a mother.

But it is not only education and knowledge that changes an attitude.

Also female-leaders who serve as good and persuasive examples, help to break out of the captivity of prejudices. This year Latvia marks the 20th anniversary of *de facto* independence. During these years, we have regained our righteous place in Europe by becoming a full-fledged member of NATO and the European Union, and by building strategic partnership with the transatlantic partners.

During these years, also a new generation of strong leaders has emerged. Such women and their life stories serve as persuasive examples for Latvian society and also globally. I'm convinced that our former President, Mrs. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, has inspired many people around the world. By setting a positive example, she has served as a source of energy for other women at moments when they lose heart and life seems to become grey.

I'm also convinced that every leader of this distinguished audience plays the same positive and highly important role in the society.

Madam Chairperson, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am thankful to our Lithuanian hosts for bringing us together and giving us the opportunity to share our visions. I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to all of you present today for devoting your time, energy and expertise to this high level discussion. Let us hope that our efforts will be highly creative and constructive today, so that we will generate good ideas about strengthening women's social role in the 21st century.

Wishing everyone a very successful exchange of ideas, I thank you very much for your kind attention!