

“Women Enhancing Democracy: Best Practices”

Report of High-Level Conference

*By Wendy Patten, Conference Rapporteur and
Special Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on Gender Issues*

**Community of Democracies VI Ministerial Conference
Vilnius, Lithuania**

June 30, 2011

About the Conference

On June 30, 2011, an extraordinary group of more than 130 women and men from 44 countries gathered in Vilnius at the Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania for a high-level conference entitled “Women Enhancing Democracy: Best Practices.” It was an inspiring day of learning, sharing challenges and successes, and sharpening the focus on the importance of women’s full and equal participation in democracy.

Organized in conjunction with the VI Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies, this high-level meeting was co-hosted by two very distinguished women leaders: President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania and President Tarja Halonen of Finland. Participants included presidents, prime ministers, speakers and members of Parliaments, ministers, business leaders, representatives of NGOs and civil society, academics, and senior UN, OSCE, and government officials – women political leaders and experts in their fields. Conference partners were the Council of Women World Leaders, European Institute for Gender Equality, Community of Democracies, International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Office of the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues at the U.S. Department of State, and Vital Voices.

The goal of the conference was to foster discussion among a unique group of leaders regarding best practices and lessons learned for achieving gender equality. While the discussion covered a wide range of issues, the conference focused on three major areas: women’s political participation, women’s economic independence, and combating violence against women and human trafficking. To share strategies and ideas more widely, the conclusions of the conference will be made available online and disseminated globally.

The conference consisted of four sessions. The opening session featured remarks by the conference co-hosts, President Grybauskaitė of Lithuania and President Halonen of Finland. They were joined by Saadia Zahidi of the World Economic Forum, Sima Samar

of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Hoda Badran of the Alliance for Arab Women in Egypt, and Melanne Vermeer, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Their presentations introduced the major themes of the conference and began the process of sharing strategies and ideas through discussion among conference participants. The opening session was followed by two panels and moderated discussions: the first addressed women's economic independence and the second focused on combating violence against women and human trafficking.

During the closing session, the conference co-hosts were joined by U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict, Margot Wallstrom. As Conference Rapporteur, Wendy Patten, the Special Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on Gender Issues, moderated the closing session and gave a preliminary overview of the major themes and ideas that emerged from the discussions throughout the day.

The full conference program is appended to this report, with a complete list of speakers and moderators for each session.

Conference Conclusions

The Challenge and Importance of Women's Political Participation

Democracy by its very nature requires the full and equal participation of women. Conference participants emphasized that women's participation is not a special sub-theme of democratic governance; rather, it is inherent in the very idea of democracy itself. It is hard to imagine a fully democratic society without women's equal participation.

The conference highlighted both the challenge and the importance of achieving gender equality in politics and government. As President Grybauskaitė noted, the number of women in leadership positions in governments around world is very low – 12 Presidents, 12 Prime Ministers, and 8 Speakers of Parliament among the 192 members of the United Nations. Although women constitute half of the world's population, they hold only one-fifth of seats in parliaments worldwide. U.S. Ambassador Melanne Vermeer called the lack of progress on women's political participation the single hardest barrier for women to overcome.

Despite the challenge posed by the low numbers of women in government, many panelists spoke about the incredibly important and transformative role of women in high-level government positions. Women in parliament have played a critical role in the development and enactment of legislation to combat violence against women and trafficking in persons. For example, informal groups of women parliamentarians in Kosovo and Finland helped pass legislation on domestic violence and on human trafficking. We heard numerous examples of ways in which women parliamentarians put gender equality and women's issues on the agenda and focus the attention of parliaments on these issues. Christine Bako, a Member of the Ugandan Parliament, shared a strategy

for getting male-dominated parliaments to care about women's issues. She and her colleagues took their male colleagues on a tour of health care facilities in Uganda. Moved by the conditions they saw firsthand, the members of Parliament came away with an understanding of the need to provide greater resources for basic health care, which is a critical issue for women and girls.

President Elbegdorj Tsakhia of Mongolia maintained that although Mongolian women are empowered and have historically played important roles in society, men still dominate the legislative debate in Parliament. To change this dynamic, his cabinet is seeking passage of legislation that would set aside a certain percentage of seats in Parliament for women.

Numerous speakers commented on the particular challenge of women's participation during democratic transitions, including the transitions taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. They noted that women's political and social status is often left unchanged by profound political transformations occurring around them. As Hoda Badran of the Alliance for Arab Women observed, women's participation was welcomed during the public protests seeking democratic change, but there is a tendency to marginalize women when the work of transition and democracy building begins. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed the need to work together to ensure that all people – women as well as men – can participate in and benefit from the new democracies that are taking shape in the region.

Gender Equality: 50-50 Plus

Gender equality includes gender parity, but it also requires something more. To be sure, we need full and equal participation of women in political and public life, but a deeper kind of change is also needed. As Mahnaz Afkhami from Iran put it, we need “50-50 plus.” We need a new kind of approach that transforms institutions, the way they operate, and the way we operate in them.

This concept extends beyond governmental entities to institutions within society more broadly. As Selima Ahmad of the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry explained, women entrepreneurs need a gender-friendly environment. To launch businesses, women need access to financing and markets, but they also need to be free from violence at home and in the marketplace. This is the gender-friendly environment that is needed to support equal access to economic opportunity. In turn, such policies allow countries to benefit from the economic contributions of all their people, women as well as men.

Education and Access to Economic Resources

Women's economic empowerment is critical to improving women's lives and to women's ability to contribute to the well-being of their families, communities, and countries. Women can be catalysts for economic growth – if they are given equal opportunities and access to economic resources.

Lack of education and gender discrimination in employment and economic opportunity constitute barriers to women's economic independence. A core strategy for achieving gender equality is education; as President Halonen emphasized, investing in girls' and women's education pays off. While education is a necessary building block in women's economic empowerment, it is not sufficient. Speakers noted that women need not only degrees but also marketable skills. They called for expanding women's access to credit, markets, product design and development, and networks.

As documented by the World Economic Forum's research, there is a global gender gap across political, economic, educational, and health issues. As Saadia Zahidi observed, the current economic crisis has only increased the need for solutions to the gender gap in economic participation and opportunity. Solutions are needed on three levels: 1) what businesses do internally to address gender equality and allow both women and men to contribute their full talents; 2) what businesses do in their operating environments; and 3) how governments shape the policy framework that affects women and businesses.

States need to bring a gender perspective to business advising and assistance. As Maud Elisabeth Olofsson, Swedish Minister for Enterprise and Energy, explained from her experience in Sweden, understanding the needs of business owners, making financing accessible, and even having an accurate count of the number of women-owned businesses required a shift in thinking about businesses and the way they operate, as well as a broader recognition of women's potential as business and economic leaders. She also emphasized the key role of mentoring and outreach in fostering women's entrepreneurship, which Sweden accomplished through an innovative program of women ambassadors. In her estimation, many women lacked the confidence to start their own businesses, so 900 Swedish women were appointed from across the country to share their business experiences in schools and community meetings of all kinds. According to Olofsson, many women responded to these women business ambassadors by telling themselves, if she can do it, I can do it.

Importance of Women's Networks

Another theme was the solidarity of women and the importance of women's networks. Participants shared numerous instances of women speaking up in one voice and using their power and positions to support women's issues and more just outcomes for women. Examples included the aforementioned women parliamentarians, women entrepreneurs conducting outreach to other women, and strength in numbers among women interacting with local government officials. As one participant recounted, when one woman was too intimidated to confront a corrupt local official, seven of them banded together and confronted him successfully. Hoda Badran of the Alliance for Arab Women echoed the need for women's solidarity, strengthening of women's NGOs, and collaborative efforts to enable women to achieve equality and benefit from democratic transitions.

Discrimination Against Women: The Core Issue

Speakers emphasized the fundamental need to address discrimination against women, which is in many ways the hardest but the most important issue that stands in the way of women's equal participation and respect for women's human rights. Panelists identified gender discrimination, whether in law or policy or structural inequality within society, as the root cause of violence against women.

Closely related to gender discrimination are perceptions of women's capabilities. Women's abilities and potential are generally undervalued due to gender stereotypes which must be challenged in a variety of ways. In this regard, speakers noted the particular importance of reaching the next generation, both boys and girls. We need to teach girls to believe that they can become presidents. President Halonen spoke of young girls in Finland, writing her letters saying that they want to be President like her one day.

Among strategies to put gender equality on the policy agenda, more research and data would be useful to provide a more extensive empirical basis for many of the challenges that women face in their daily lives. Such data will help make the case, put specific women's issues on the table, and drive the policy discussion toward solutions.

Violence Against Women, Trafficking, and the Rule of Law

Another theme that emerged was the importance of the rule of law, which is crucial to any strong democracy. Police reform and police capacity-building are essential because of the key role law enforcement plays in ensuring justice and the rule of law at the local level – in the daily lives of women and men. There must be accountability for crimes of violence against women. As UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kyung-wha Kang, stated, a culture of impunity is the greatest threat to human rights. If there is no accountability for violence against women, then the violence will be repeated. Indeed, the rule of law requires that states do all they can to prevent and address violence against women in all its forms. Democracies cannot thrive when women live in fear of violence and abuse and when basic human dignity is not respected.

Legislation is the foundational basis for addressing gender equality and women's rights. A strong legal framework is needed to hold those who commit violations accountable, which in turn helps change societal attitudes that undergird gender discrimination and fuel abuses like violence against women and human trafficking. Laws, however, need to be accompanied by resources to implement them and training for all key actors involved – police, prosecutors, judges, and court personnel – as well as victims and survivors, so that they will know their rights and know how to seek justice and assistance. Members of Parliament can play an important role in raising awareness of gender-based violence. As the Speaker of the Albanian Parliament, Jozefina Topalli, described, members have helped raise domestic violence as a serious public issue, both through parliamentary sessions and through speaking about the issue with people around the country.

Participants noted the synergy between domestic and international policy development on these issues, as well as the importance of ensuring that efforts to combat trafficking and other forms of violence against women are not impeded by borders. Yet while

transnational cooperation is critical, trafficking can only be combated effectively if states fully acknowledge their responsibility through comprehensive anti-trafficking policies that reflect a gender perspective.

Numerous speakers highlighted the problem of sexual violence in armed conflict, which since time immemorial has been seen as an inevitable consequence of war. After years of activism by women, the issue has been put on the UN Security Council's agenda with an unwavering message that sexual violence in armed conflict can and must be stopped.

The Vital Role of NGOs

Another central theme of the conference was the vital role of NGOs in democratic governance. This point was pressed not only nor even principally by representatives of civil society, but rather by senior government officials, who spoke about how women's NGOs have mobilized women, brought issues to the fore, and engaged with governments and parliaments to pass laws, solve problems, and bring about more just outcomes for women and girls. One example comes from Kosovo where, as President Atifete Jahjaga commented, a women's NGO took the lead in organizing women and pressed for a new national strategy and legislation on violence against women, urging a comprehensive response that addressed both the justice sector and services and assistance for survivors. The law has since been approved and implementation efforts are underway.

Involving Men Leaders in Promoting Gender Equality

Gender equality is first and foremost a basic human right. As several speakers noted, it is also about women and men working together for outcomes that benefit societies as a whole. While the promotion of gender equality will help women overcome barriers that stem from discrimination, it will also enable women to contribute their skills, experiences, and perspectives to solving a wide array of public problems.

In this regard, men's involvement in the promotion of gender equality is very important, in particular the role of men in positions of leadership. Male leaders should use their bully pulpit to make the case for gender equality. President Tsakhia of Mongolia voiced his support on this point, urging men not to be shy in talking about gender equality. As UN Deputy High Commissioner Kang said, men need to hear about discrimination against women and the importance of gender equality from men in positions of power. Men in leadership positions should demonstrate not merely a token but rather a serious commitment to appointing women to positions of power and responsibility.

The Need for Action to Achieve Gender Equality

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon sent a message to the conference, voicing his support for women's empowerment around the world and underscoring the importance that the UN attaches to efforts to promote women's full participation. The Secretary General's Special Representative, Margot Wallstrom, delivered his message to the conference participants. The Secretary General affirmed that the UN "has amply

documented how women's involvement contributes to building more transparent and inclusive democracies." He urged greater action:

[The UN has] long worked to promote greater participation of women at all levels of society, and recent events bear out the importance of our activities. In Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere, women are in the vanguard of demanding democratic change, human rights, dignity and opportunity. I join these women in calling for faster and wider progress in meeting these aspirations.

Women's comparatively low level of political participation, women's inferior economic status, and violence against women have been too often seen as inevitable aspects of our societies. Simply waiting for change to happen gradually, on its own, is unacceptable. As Special Representative Wallstrom and others recommended, governments need to take specific action steps to close gender gaps. States should enact and implement laws to uphold rights and end violence against women, develop specific policies on equal opportunities and shared responsibilities, and implement special measures to achieve gender equality. As Ms. Wallstrom said, we need to put competent, excellent women where they belong, which is around the tables where important decisions are being made.

In closing, President Grybauskaitė urged participants in the high-level conference to use their power of example as leaders – women leaders and leaders on gender equality. By stepping forward to tackle challenges in politics and policy-making, women can lead by example and they can champion policies that promote women's rights and opportunities. President Halonen emphasized the importance of women's networks in this endeavor. After commenting that her time at the conference was well spent, she suggested that the organizers create a platform for continued networking and sharing of ideas among participants. Such efforts can help foster concrete action to advance gender equality and, by enabling women to contribute their full potential along with men, help us build a better, safer world.

The Conference Rapporteur wishes to thank the session rapporteurs whose contributions to the conference and to this final report were invaluable: Michelle Bekkering of the International Republican Institute, Sara Hahn, a fellow of the Council of Women World Leaders, and Indre Mackeviciute of the European Institute for Gender Equality.

**WOMEN ENHANCING DEMOCRACY: BEST PRACTICES
PROPOSED AGENDA**

**Vilnius, Lithuania
June 30, 2011**

Venue: Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, S. Daukanto A. 3

8:00 am – 9:00 am Registration of Participants

9:30 am – 10:45 am Opening Remarks and Moderated Discussion:

**Women Inspiring the World: Educated,
Empowered, Equal**

Remarks:

Her Excellency **Dalia Grybauskaitė**,
President of Lithuania
Her Excellency **Tarja Halonen**, President of
Finland
Saadia Zahidi, Director and Head of
Constituents at the
World Economic Forum (Davos), Women
Index
Sima Samar, Afghanistan, IHRC
Hoda Badran, Egypt, Alliance for Arab
Women
Melanne Vermeer, Ambassador-At-Large
for Global Women's Issues,
US State Department

Moderator: ***Virginija Langbakk***, Director, European
Institute for Gender Equality

10:45 am – 3:15 pm Moderated Discussions:

During the roundtable sessions, participants will share their experiences on the topics of the conference. Roundtables will reflect strategies or tools that can be used to increase women's participation in consolidated democracies, as well as in emerging democracies and transitional governments. Panelists will consist of government officials and civil society activists. These discussions will be moderated by a well-known figure. The event will be transmitted live via internet webcast. Different non-governmental organizations around the world will be notified and will be able to watch the conference and to actively participate through the web platform. The most popular questions will be raised by the moderator, enabling activists around the world to participate in the discussion indirectly.

10:45 am – 11:20 am	<u>Coffee Break</u>	
11:20 am – 1:15 pm	Session A:	<p>Women’s Economic Independence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Supporting women entrepreneurs;</i> ○ <i>Women’s economic empowerment in emerging democracies;</i> ○ <i>Legal system and use of quotas;</i> ○ <i>Role of education in transitional societies</i> <p>Panelists: Elbegdorj Tsakhia, President of Mongolia; Solvita Āboltiņa, Latvia, Speaker of the Parliament; Eva Biaudet, Finland, Ombudsman; Selima Ahmad, Bangladesh, President of Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Mahnaz Afkhami, Iran, Academia; Dalia Leinartė, Lithuania, Academia</p> <p>Moderator: Lyse Doucet, BBC World Service</p> <p>Form: Moderated discussion (no prepared remarks)</p>
1:15 pm – 1:20 pm	<u>Technical Break</u>	
1:20 pm – 3:15 pm	Session B:	<p>Combating Violence against Women and Human Trafficking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Women in conflict zones (UNSC resolution 1325) and in transitional societies;</i> ○ <i>Domestic violence;</i> ○ <i>Challenges in emerging democracies;</i> ○ <i>Role of NGOs and women leaders.</i> <p>Panelists: Atifete Jahjaga, President of Kosovo; Jozefina Çoba Topalli, Speaker of the Parliament of Albania; Christine Bako, Uganda, Member of Parliament; Kyung-wha Kang, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN; Ana Temkina, Russian Federation, Academia; Cindy Dyer, Vital Voices Global Partnership</p> <p>Moderator: Myria Vassiliadou, <i>European Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, former Secretary General of European Women's Lobby</i></p>

	Form:	Moderated discussion (no prepared remarks)
3:15 pm – 5:00 pm	<u>Lunch</u>	
3:15 pm – 3:45 pm	<u>Press Conference</u>	Her Excellency Dalia Grybauskaitė , President of Lithuania Her Excellency Tarja Halonen , President of Finland
5:00 pm – 5:45 pm	<u>Closing Remarks</u>	Her Excellency Tarja Halonen , President of Finland Margot Wallstrom , <i>Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict</i> U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Her Excellency Dalia Grybauskaitė , President of Lithuania
	Special Conference Reporter and moderator	Wendy Patten , Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Gender Issues