

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, Latvia

President of Latvia (1999-2007)

Women's choices: “Women and girls are always told that they must make a choice between being feminine, being women, and mothers, and wives, and so on, or even good daughters, and having a career. I think that it's extremely unfair.”

On opportunities: “When you get an invitation to participate in something, you should never refuse it. These are always opportunities. You create yourself a network of people who are aware of your qualities and your qualifications. Too many women do not take the presented opportunities.”

“I remember once at a cocktail party, some gentleman – he had a few drinks already – started orating about how women shouldn't really be in academic life. They should be at home, looking after their children. And I encouraged him to keep going and tell us more. This was an academic party, you know. I brought him to such ridiculous conclusions and his arguments became so absurd and I didn't say a word, I just kept encouraging him. In the end, he looked at me and he said ‘You do know how to give a fellow a rope to hang himself.’ This was precisely what I was meaning to do and it worked. (...) I had various techniques of disarming people who disrespected me. And they very quickly learnt a lesson that it was best not to do that with me.”

On a work/life balance: “My identity as a person was linked to intellectual work. I couldn't see myself sitting at home and polishing silverware or planning Halloween decorations for the family. But I actually did a lot of these things for my family. My children remember that I baked them a snowman cake for Christmas and a ladybug cake for a birthday. But I didn't want to do it full time. Balancing this next to my work was really difficult. I was a very exhausted woman at times, I can tell you that.”

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