

**Opening remarks by Ms Carolyn Hannan, Director  
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Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

**At the  
First International Helvi Sipilä Seminar 2006  
“Power in her hands”**

**Finnish Consulate  
New York, 2 March 2006**

Madame Ambassador,  
Distinguished participants,

I am honoured to make opening remarks at this First International Helvi Sipilä Seminar and want to express the appreciation of the Division for the Advancement of Women for this initiative. It is particularly fitting that this Seminar series is being initiated during the 50<sup>th</sup> session and the 60<sup>th</sup> year of the work of the Commission on the Status of Women, and on the important occasion of the centennial of full political rights for women in Finland. I congratulate the women and men of Finland for being the first country in the world to provide women with the right to both vote and hold office – which, as the Minister mentioned in her address to the Commission yesterday, meant that for the first time in the world women could vote and vote for a woman. This is truly something to commemorate and we are all today reaping the benefits of this step taken in Finland 100 years ago.

I thank the Finnish Federation of University Women/International Federation of University Women and the Finnish UNIFEM Committee for extending this opportunity to me to address the opening of the Seminar.

As the Secretariat of the Commission, the Division for the Advancement of Women encourages the organization of parallel events as a means to enrich the work of the Commission. Each year Member States, United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations organize a large number of events – panels, workshops and training activities – focused on critical issues for gender equality and empowerment of women. This year there is a dynamic programme of around 200 events in the context of the Commission.

We particularly encourage parallel events which are focused on the substantive themes being addressed by the Commission, as this seminar does by focusing on the theme of women and power and decision-making. It is positive that International Helvi Sipilä Seminar will be an annual event as this will provide an opportunity to critically examine the themes in the new multi-year programme of work to be adopted by the Commission at this session.

In the context of the theme for this Seminar: “Power in her hands”, I am honoured

appreciated by participants at the commemoration of the ten-year anniversary of the Beijing Conference.

The Commission on the Status of Women met for the first time at Lake Success, New York, in February 1947. Initially, the Commission focused on legal measures to protect the human rights of women and development of awareness on the status and situation of women around the world. Debates in the Commission brought very unfamiliar issues into the international political arena. From the very beginning, the work of the Commission attracted the interest, participation and support of the growing international women's movement.

By the mid 1960s, the Commission had begun to recognize and address women's role in economic and social development. Delegates from developing countries drew attention in particular to the situation of women in rural areas and the need to enhance their contributions and address their priorities and needs. Helvi Sipilä was the Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1967, almost 40 years ago. From 1968 – 1972, she was the Special Rapporteur on the Status of Women and Family Planning. During this time, the Commission played a major role in transforming the understanding of the role of women in development.

In 1975, at the urging of the Commission, NGOs and women leaders in the United Nations such as Helvi Sipilä, the United Nations observed International Women's Year with the theme "Equality, Development and Peace". Minister Sipilä was appointed as the Secretary-General of the International Women's Year and the first United Nations Conference on Women, in Mexico in 1975. The culmination of the year, under the leadership of Minister Sipilä, was the adoption of the first global plan of action to improve the status of women.

The United Nations Decade for Women, from 1976-1985, created an unprecedented momentum for change and culminated with the establishment of the *Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000*. During the decade, a new consciousness emerged on the essential contributions of women to the development process and the necessity of women's involvement for the achievement of all development goals.

The world conferences – from the first world conference in Mexico in 1975 to the fourth world conference in Beijing in 1995 - played a critical role in identifying obstacles, gaps and challenges for gender equality and empowerment of women and ways to address these. They set in motion an important and continuing cycle of research and analysis; goal-setting; reviewing progress to identify achievements as well as gaps and obstacles; and renewing and expanding commitments.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, Members States adopted the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* which consolidated the consensus and commitments achieved over the previous decades. The *Platform for Action* continues to represent the global policy framework for gender equality and empowerment

of women and guides the work of Member States, the United Nations and other international and regional bodies, including organizations and ne

be increasingly focused on exchange of ideas and experiences, including good practices, as well as on persistent gaps and challenges and the ways to overcome them, to ensure accelerated implementation. It must also strengthen the voice of the women's movement in the work of the United Nations.

Throughout her life, Helvi Sipilä has powerfully illustrated the effectiveness of women's leadership. I hope that the inspiration of her leadership can continue to bear fruit in the United Nations, in increasing the number of women in leadership positions within the system itself, as well as in the Permanent Missions to the United Nations. In the 60 years of the United Nations, there have never been more than 18 Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in New York. (This should also be put in the context of the fact that there were four women signatories – of 160 - to the Charter of the United Nations in 1946, from Brazil, China, Dominican Republic, and USA). That we have only reached 18 women of 191 Permanent Representatives in 2006, indicates the very slow rate of progress. Finland has shown consistent leadership in this area, and has today a woman as the Permanent Representative, H.E. Kirsti Lintonen. I hope that her leadership and that of the other current women Permanent Representatives, will inspire other Member States to also set good examples in this respect, in keeping with commitments under the Critical Area of Concern in the Platform for Action, Women in power and decision-making.

The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, once said that there was no tool more effective for development than the empowerment of women. Ensuring access to power and decision-making is the only way to ensure full involvement of women and the benefits of their contributions. The number of women in political decision-making has increased over past decades, but the pace of change has been woefully slow. There is very

