

Opening remarks
by
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Fifth International Helvi Sipilä Seminar

United Nations Headquarters, 4 March 2010

Madame Moderator,
Distinguished participants,

I am honoured to participate at this Fifth International Helvi Sipilä Seminar. I congratulate the Finnish Federation of University Women for organizing this seminar, and thank you for inviting me to provide opening remarks.

This is the first Helvi Sipilä seminar since her death last May. It is thus also an occasion to celebrate her as a true champion and pioneer of women's rights. At the time of her passing, the United Nations Secretary-General praised Helvi Sipilä as a women's rights advocate and the effectiveness of her leadership. Her legacy serves as a reminder that no effort should be spared to ensure the equal participation of women in decision-making in all areas of life. It is only fitting that this year's seminar focuses on "Women and Power", in memory of Helvi Sipilä.

In 1972, Helvi Sipilä became the first woman to be appointed an Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, a remarkable achievement at a time when 97 per cent of United Nations senior management (D1 and above) was male. She headed the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, which included the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, until her retirement from the Organization in 1980. Ms. Sipilä used her leadership position in the United Nations to advocate effectively for women's rights.

During her tenure, Ms. Sipilä served as the Secretary-General for the first World Conference on Women, in Mexico City, in 1975. She pointedly noted that the Conference was the first intergovernmental meeting at which women formed part of virtually all delegations, and she expressed her hope that it would set a precedent for equal representation of women and men in all future international meetings, whether on political or economic affairs, on disarmament, trade or human settlement. Ms. Sipilä was also instrumental in the founding of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), then known as the United Nations Voluntary Fund for the Advancement of Women.

This seminar series was started in March 2006, in honour of Helvi Sipilä's work and her contribution to the Commission on the Status of Women, as well as to other international and national women's organizations. The seminars recognize Helvi Sipilä's effective use of her leadership position, and power, in the United Nations to push for gender equality and empowerment of women. She systematically reminded her predominantly male leadership of the need to fully utilize all the human resources of the world, women as well as men.

Helvi Sipilä demonstrated the effectiveness of women's leadership throughout her long life. She was an impressive role model, and her memory will serve as a reminder to all of us that we must finish the job of realizing the equal access of women and men to leadership positions everywhere, including at the United Nations.

Dear participants,

We can rightfully be proud of the progress made in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women since that first World Conference on Women in 1975. 2010 marks the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. At this session, the Commission on the Status of Women will undertake a review of the implementation of the Platform and of the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly held in 2000. It will also contribute to shaping a gender perspective towards the full realization of the Millennium Development Goals. The session will focus on an exchange of experiences, good practices and lessons learned with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and challenges.

There have been noticeable gains for women and girls. Globally in 2007, women accounted for 39 per cent of all people engaged in paid employment outside of agriculture, a small but important increase from 35 per cent in 1990. In 2008, women's labour force participation reached an estimated 52.6 per cent. Access to education has increased for girls at all levels, particularly in primary education. In 2007, there were 96 girls for each 100 boys enrolled in first grade, compared with 92 girls in 1999. In some countries, women now outnumber men at tertiary level. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has reached almost universal ratification, with 186 States being party to the treaty. Work on the Convention was one of the significant efforts of the Commission on the Status of Women during the period that Helvi Sipilä headed the Commission's Secretariat in the 1970s.

Policies to address HIV/AIDS increasingly place specific emphasis on prevention, treatment and care for women. A growing number of States have in place comprehensive legal, policy, and institutional frameworks to end violence against women and girls, and support services are increasingly available to victims/survivors. In December 2009, women held 18.9 per cent of seats in single/lower chambers of parliament, compared to 11.3 per cent in 1995. 25 countries had reached the 30 per cent threshold of more women parliamentarians, a significant increase from only five countries in 1995.

In many countries, national mechanisms for gender equality, including ministries and offices in the Executive Branch, as well as Parliamentary committees and independent, advisory and monitoring bodies play a key role in the promotion of gender equality. The gender mainstreaming strategy is increasingly applied across all sectors, supported by a wider range of tools, capacity-building programmes and training. Monitoring and evaluation of efforts has improved.

Despite these advances, the Beijing Platform for Action has yet to be fully implemented. Progress in improving women's lives, eliminating discrimination and achieving equality has been uneven across countries and regions. We have also been moving too slowly to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and there has been almost no progress with regard to MDG 5, to improve maternal health. Every year, 536,000 women and girls die as a result of pregnancy or childbirth. Women are more likely than men to be living in poverty.

Illiteracy remains a serious constraint for women, who continue to account for nearly two thirds of the 776 million illiterate adults in the world. Gender wage-gaps persist in all parts of the world. The global economic and financial crisis has created new hurdles to women's employment, and estimates suggest that unemployment rates are higher for women than men. More women than men remain trapped in insecure and often unpaid work. The deliberate targeting of civilians and the use of sexual violence against women continues on a large scale in ongoing conflicts.

Discrimination in law has not been eliminated, and discriminatory application and enforcement of laws prevents women from enjoying equal rights and access to resources and opportunities. Negative gender stereotypes based on societal beliefs and attitudes constrain their opportunities and choices. Women continue to be responsible for most domestic and caregiving work. This unequal sharing of responsibilities negatively impacts their educational and employment opportunities, and limits their involvement in public life.

Your seminar will focus on the question of women and power. Power is defined as the ability or capacity to perform or act effectively. It also gives a number of synonyms for power, including might and authority. Some of the well-known quotations on power make us not to want, or encounter it ["Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely"]. Yet John Stuart Mill, in his essay "On liberty" advised that "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant". Power can be wielded in many different ways, and we are faced with power constantly in our daily lives. Power – especially in the meaning of authority – is critical for progress and advancement.

Helvi Sipilä surely wielded power. She used it to advocate for the improvement of the status of women in all parts of the world. She saw the harm that was done to women – and societies – by discrimination, violence and abuse. She understood that lack

of power – in the home, in the family, in the community – kept women in positions of inferiority and subjected to exploitation. She saw that unequal power relations between women and men perpetuated stereotypes that harmed women and held societies back, everywhere.

Power is thus also a force for good. It is necessary to overcome the obstacles and challenges that continue to be barriers for women's enjoyment of their rights, their access to justice and equal opportunities. Power is necessary to protect women from harm and violence.

The commemoration of the 15-year anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is an opportune time to consider the role of power in the promotion of gender equality and women's enjoyment of their human rights.

I wish you a productive meeting

Thank you.
