

**Opening remarks by Ms Carolyn Hannan, Director
United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women
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 50th session and the 60th 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 to “introduce” to you a truly remarkable woman, Minister Helvi Sipilä, as an example of the incredible force for positive change that a woman with power in her hands can be. I am sure there is no need to introduce Minister Sipilä and her important legacy to many of you. I had the privilege to meet Minister Sipilä only once but I can say that she is somewhat of a legend in the women’s movement, and symbolizes for many what women’s leadership should be – driven by a strong sense of justice and courageously pushing for change, challenging norms and practices and defending the interests of those in vulnerable situations.

Although Minister Sipilä retired from the United Nations many years ago, she remains a role model and source of inspiration for women in the United Nations today, as the first woman Assistant Secretary-General in the United Nations (1972-1983). Minister Sipilä, a lawyer by profession, incorporated into her work at the United Nations an acute awareness of and commitment to gender equality and the human rights of women. When she was appointed to the post of Assistant-Secretary-General in 1972, there were only 7 women (3%) in higher management positions (D1 and above). It cannot have been easy to be a woman leader in the United Nations at this time but Helvi Sipilä and her contemporaries courageously paved the way for others. While the numbers of women in senior positions in the United Nations has increased significantly, there is still a long way to go before the United Nations is fully living up to the commitments made in the world conferences on women.

Minister Sipilä would, however, I am sure be encouraged by the initiative taken recently by the Office of Human Resources Management in the United Nations Secretariat. An innovative Women in Leadership programme has been established for women at senior level in the United Nations (D1 and above) to provide support to women who attain leadership positions. A particularly important element is the possibility for the women leaders to meet on an annual basis to develop networking as an important mechanism for support and inspiration.

Minister Sipilä used her leadership position and power in the United Nations very effectively to push for gender equality and empowerment of women. She systematically reminded the predominately male leadership of the need to fully utilize the all the human resources of the world, women as well as men. She unceasingly promoted peace, noting rightly that the only way to prevent war is to strive for justice in the world by reducing discrimination and injustices, including gender inequality.

I would like to say a few words about the history of the Commission on the Status of Women, both because it is an important anniversary year for the Commission, and because the story of Helvi Sipilä is so tied up with the work of the Commission and the world conferences on women. For this reason, we had hoped that Minister Sipilä would be able to attend the ten-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Platform for Action in the Commission last year, but she was unfortunately unable to do so. She did, however, send an inspiring message by video to the meeting, which was very much

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 networks of civil society.

A number of significant achievements resulted from the work of the Commission during the period the Secretariat was led by Minister Sipilä. One of the major achievements of the Commission was the establishment of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which has developed into an effective accountability mechanism, positively complementing the policy work of the Commission. In 1979, after four years of preparatory work by the Commission, the General Assembly adopted the landmark treaty. It entered into force in 1981 and has now been ratified by 181 countries.

It was also a significant achievement that the Commission, again under the leadership of Minister Sipilä, established as early as 1975 the integral links between equality - including human rights - development and peace and has consistently worked to enhance the synergies between these three critical goals. The importance of this work was underscored by the priority given to human rights, development and security in the 2005 World Summit as the three essential pillars of the work of the United Nations. In this respect, the Decade and the first World Conference in Mexico, with Minister Sipilä playing a key role, was at the forefront of global thinking.

Over the past decade, the Commission has constantly reviewed its working methods to increase the focus on implementation at national level and provide a forum for exchange of ideas, experiences, good practices and lessons learned. In the post-Beijing era, the Commission has organized interactive expert panels on the themes under consideration and more recently, it has organized round tables for high level representatives attending the annual sessions, such as Ministers, State Secretaries and heads of national mechanisms for gender equality and empowerment of Women.

The United Nations has played a critical role as a catalyst for gender equality and the empowerment of women, largely due to the foresight, dynamism and persistence of leaders such as Minister Sipilä. Throughout its history, the Commission on the Status of Women has provided an important political forum where much of the critical discussion has been located and important global decisions have been made. It has been a strong advocate for gender equality and empowerment of women across the globe and has provided a unique space for exchange of national experience and good practice and for bringing the voice of the women's movement to the work of the United Nations. Thanks to women leaders, such as Minister Sipilä, the United Nations has had a positive impact on the lives of women at country level and remains a driving force for gender equality and empowerment of women.

At this 50th session of the Commission, we must both celebrate the achievements of this important global mechanism and consider ways to enhance its role in the new millennium to effectively address the challenges ahead. The development of the new multi-year programme of work provides the opportunity to do this. The Commission's role in offering an important global space for interaction and dialogue, must in the future

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 little comparative data available on women's participation in other critical areas – such as the economy, the media, the judiciary, and in academia and local government. Securing women's entry into decision-making arenas is no guarantee that they will be in a position to influence decisions and bring about positive change. Moving beyond increasing access to looking at ways to strengthen influence and impact is essential. Documenting positive examples of women's leadership, such as that of Minister Sipilä – to provide role models for younger women – is critical.

I hope that your discussions today will put forward new ideas on how to address some of the challenges raised in the report of the Secretary-General to the Commission and in the expert panel held in the Commission on Tuesday.

Thank you.

