

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends,

I would like to start by thanking the organizers of this seminar, Finnish CSOs working in the field of gender equality and advancing the rights of women and girls, for all the hard work you have done in order to make this great event happen. Let me also thank **Edinah Masiyiwa** of Women's Action Group Zimbabwe, **Stacy Dry Lara** of Graduate Women International and **Jill Anami**, YWCA Kenya, for bringing the international perspective to the discussion. And thank you so much, **Sanna Vesikansa**, Deputy Mayor of Helsinki, **Marjo Lyyra**, president of the Federation of Finnish Midwives, and **Terhi Heinilä**, Secretary General of the National Council of Women of Finland, for explaining in concrete terms how sexual and reproductive health and rights are being realized in the Finnish society.

In Finland the government, municipalities and civil society organizations often work closely together. We can learn from each other and join forces both nationally and in the international scene. That is why I am happy to conclude this 14<sup>th</sup> International Helvi Sipilä Seminar, being myself Ambassador for Gender Equality at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Gender equality is a key success factor of the Finnish society. The rapid development of Finland from a poor, agricultural and conflict-torn society in 1917, when we gained independence, to one of the wealthiest and most stable countries in the world, would not have been possible without harnessing the potential of the whole society - and not only half of it.

It is therefore only logical that enhancing the rights of women and girls globally is also the first priority of the Finnish development policy. Gender equality is promoted not only by development policy, but through our foreign policy in general. This includes also advancing the 1325 agenda for Women, Peace and Security, where Finland aims at increasing the number of women in crisis management, in mediation and in peace-building. And Finland is one of the very few countries with a post of Gender Ambassador at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are one of Finland's key priorities both in development policy and in our human rights work. We believe that SRHR are a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights as they enable women and girls to use their full potential in society. In other words, they are key to the economic empowerment of women.

At the policy level, Finland is cooperating with other countries so that the international consensus on sexual and reproductive health and rights will hold. Even retaining existing agreements requires constant efforts. Many countries have restricted women's and girls' rights in such areas as safe abortion. Even for EU Member States, it has been difficult to find a common position in international negotiations.

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**UNFPA** is one of Finland's main United Nations partner agencies in our development policy. The same is true for **UN Women**, for which Finland is one of the top donors. At the country level, we are increasing access to quality basic services, with particular focus on services related to the health of women and girls. I would

like to mention Somalia, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Yemen, where we have broad interventions all aimed at improving women's and girls' health. We also cooperate closely with international CSOs. It is estimated that 1.5 million women and girls have used sexual and reproductive health services through the support of Finland's bilateral cooperation (2015–2018)

Only in 2018, Finland allocated over 41 million euros, mainly through UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, to support sexual and reproductive health and rights.

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Lastly, I would like to highlight that there is a broad consensus among major political parties in Finland on the importance of gender equality, also as an integral element of our foreign and development policy. We will have parliamentary elections in mid-April this spring, and the pre-election campaign has already started. The election programs of different parties have been carefully analyzed by my colleagues, and it can be concluded that there will most likely be a strong focus on the rights of women and girls also in the future.

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Once more, thank you everybody, and I wish you every success in your important work for the right of women and girls.