

Minister Helvi Sipilä 1915 – 2009

Honorary Member of BPW Finland, Woman of the Year 1965

“I started out as a female lawyer, but soon turned into a promoter of women's rights. This was primarily due to my practical experience of the weaker position of women in society rather than any sentimental conviction.”

When she was chosen as the first female assistant secretary-general of the United Nations, Helvi Sipilä had a long background as a lawyer and organisational leader. At the UN her areas of responsibility were women's issues, social development and crime prevention.

When she announced the opening of her law firm on the front page of a daily newspaper in November 1943, she became the second woman in Finnish history to begin practising as a lawyer. Her additional voluntary work in the field of national and international co-operation led to ever more demanding duties, and in 1972 she was offered the position of an assistant secretary-general of the United Nations. Sipilä was the first woman to hold this important post, and she did so for almost ten years.

After her return to Finland Sipilä also took another step in opening to women the path to the top of the political hierarchy: in the presidential election of 1982. She was the first woman candidate to stand.

Helvi Sipilä grew up to be an independent and firm-minded woman who did not, however, lack the ability to take other people's feelings into consideration. The seeds of peace activism were sown early in the young child.

“When the League of Nations was founded, my fellows and I were happily convinced that that marked the end of war since the world nations could now negotiate with one another.”

When she was awarded her Higher Law (Bachelor of Laws) certificate on 15 March 1939, she became Finland's thirty-eighth law graduate and, upon taking the oath two days later at the Turku Appeal Court, the eighteenth woman in Finland to begin practical training at an appeal court. Since this training occurred under exceptional conditions, she was awarded the title of Deputy Judge (Master of Laws) by the Appeal Court on 19 December 1941, being the sixteenth woman in Finland to gain this qualification. It was difficult for women to make a career in the law at a time when women Law graduates were a rarity and women judges were often regarded almost with suspicion. But Helvi Sipilä pushed ahead purposefully along the path that she had chosen.

Sipilä's beginning of court practice was marked by exceptional circumstances for the nation: on 3 September the Second World War broke out, and on 30 November the Winter War began for Finland. The peace concluded with the Soviet Union in March 1940 was a brief one, and Finland was driven into the Continuation War in June 1941. Sipilä and other female jurists constituted a significant labour reserve at the courts when men were forced to leave their civilian jobs. This work was sufficient for Sipilä to be granted the title of Deputy Judge. Her 'war service' continued in the form of supernumerary posts at the Administrative Court and the Supreme Court.

It had, however, long been Helvi Sipilä's real dream to work as an attorney, and in November 1943 she opened her own office. For Sipilä this event had great significance: she was now a real lawyer, and her application for membership of the Finnish Lawyers' Association (*Suomen asianajajaliitto*) was accepted on 31 May 1946.

Sipilä became involved in a number of voluntary activities in addition to her regular job. Her voluntary work for various national and international bodies led to ever more demanding tasks. Between 1960 and 1972 she represented Finland in a number of UN organisations. When an offer by the UN secretary-general to appoint her an assistant secretary-general followed, she felt unable, for the sake of her own country and the world in general, to say no to this position. She was obliged to leave her law office in Helsinki and to move abroad, first to New York and later to Vienna, for a period of more than nine years.

Her work as a lawyer had accustomed Helvi Sipilä to defending those in weak positions, and she now expanded her defensive role to cover the world economy and needy people in developing countries. As an assistant secretary-general, she was in charge of the Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, which dealt, among other things, with women's issues and crime prevention. The major events during her period as an assistant secretary-general were the International Women's Year in 1975 and the first United Nations world conference for the advancement of women, of which she was the secretary-general. A process was set in motion—a process of learning—that would involve deliberation, negotiation, setting objectives, identifying obstacles and reviewing the progress made.

Since the year 1975 March 8 has been celebrated as International Women's Day. United Nations Decade for Women, from 1976-1985, was also established in 1975 Meeting

Helvi Sipilä was very keen supporter of the scouting movement. In her actions she followed the motto: "Every scout is every scout's comrade". It was precisely the scouting spirit that made Sipilä into a leader who did not issue orders from above but walked the same path as her fellows and planned all her actions in collaboration with others and with consideration for the views of others. Sipilä realised that helping the individual also involves changing the world and that it was necessary to influence public opinion and national leaders in order to make the world wake up and take notice of the prevailing injustice, oppression and suffering.

It was in the scouting spirit that Helvi Sipilä served at the UN, where she made great contributions towards improving the status of women in particular. She refused to regard their inferior position as a problem in isolation, since women, children and men are bound together in the same society; but she nevertheless considered that women's rights were (and are) neglected in many societies. Since the subordinate position of women is a great obstacle to development, it is essential - for the sake of men and children as well - that women should be trusted and given the right to participate in decision-making, and that they should be granted general, recognised equality. Sipilä believed that change must start specifically with women.

Helvi Sipilä's work on behalf of women and men did not end with her term as a UN assistant secretary-general. She continued to play an active role as the chairwoman of the UN Women's Development Fund's Finnish association; instead of dealing with global-level

issues, she now devoted herself to helping individual human beings through development aid.

“The only way to prevent war is to strive for justice in the world by reducing discrimination and injustices”, said Helvi Sipilä many times. She was also the founder of the Finnish Refugee Council, and several other national humanitarian organisations, as well as being the honorary chairperson of countless associations.

In short, it may be said that in her career Helvi Sipilä followed many new and challenging paths in the field of the enhancement and defence of women's rights. She was the sort of person who understood changing times and the new attitudes and fresh challenges that they bring with them.