

Good morning. I would like to thank the Gender Equality Commission of the Council of Europe, the Equality Division, and the Finnish Ministry of Education, Science and Communication for organising this conference and for inviting me to speak with you today.

I'd like you to imagine a box.

It's large, rectangular, and open enough to let plenty of light in.

You prepare a special room for this box. It's decorated with strong, bold colours, and is spacious to allow for the capacity for growth.

You place the box on a high pedestal so it can be respected and appreciated by all.

It is strong, sturdy, and has no label on the outside.

Inside the box, you place the most precious, priceless, and important entity. Your newborn baby. You have big dreams and high expectations for your baby. Your wish is that they'll be intelligent, strong, assertive, and successful. You speak to and about your baby with the faith that they will be able to achieve all that you hope. Friends and family members engage in conversations with your child about business, science, politics, history, and ask them if they want to lead their country one day. They buy them a variety of toys to foster different areas of development and engage them with challenging games. Some friends and family become mentors. Everyone has high expectations for your child's future.

Now, please imagine another box.

It's large, rectangular, and protected by a canopy to filter the light. You place the box in a safe and peaceful space. The box is labelled "fragile".

Inside, you have placed a most precious, delicate, and adorable entity. It's your second baby. You want this baby to be attractive, thin, caring, neat, polite, and able to balance work with their family responsibilities. Friends and family members engage in conversations about fashion, arts, cooking, and shopping. They buy them cute accessories, pretty baby dolls to foster their nurturing side, and read them fairy tales. You speak to and about your baby with the faith that they will be a great parent and have a big family one day.

Everyone has similar hopes.

What if I told you the baby in the box on the wide, open pedestal was your daughter and the box under the veiled canopy had your son? Hard to imagine, isn't it?

Because as progressive as we all are, as much as we fight for gender equality, we still cannot envision a different reality. We still cannot envision placing our baby girls on a high pedestal or expect them to accomplish as much in their lives as our boys. And we still cannot envision why we would ever want to buy dolls for boys or foster their empathetic side, as we assume it would mean being of lesser value to economic, political, and social contributions.

In the months of preparation for this speech, I read countless books and articles, and had conversations with influential gender equality advocates, like Gilbert Baker, creator of the pride

rainbow flag, and Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, former Prime Minister of Iceland, seeking their insights on this topic.

I finally realized that the message I was to bring to you today wasn't 'out there', but rather within me, as I have been experiencing it for the past 30 years.

I know this story well because it is my own. "Remember what this moment feels like" was a mantra I repeated to myself throughout childhood because of the disconnect I felt between children's hopes and dreams for themselves and those of the adults around them.

My childhood, or rather my girlhood, was heavily defined by my gender. Being of Aramaic ethnicity, Turkish descent, with Lebanese parents, and born and raised in Dubai, my upbringing was a convoluted mix of ancient Christian beliefs, Middle Eastern values, the ever-increasing influence of Western culture, thanks to satellite TV, and of course, my role in society as a girl.

On the outside, my childhood didn't look any different than that of other children I knew. My parents were married, we lived in a nice home, we had plenty of toys, and went on vacations when we could afford to. I had all the characteristics of what a typical girl was supposed to have; I was quiet, obedient, and skinny.

On the inside, my childhood wasn't as perfect. My first experience rejecting food was when I was three years old in kindergarten. Challenges like anorexia, bulimia, depression, and suicide attempts all emerged before the age of 12, influenced in large part by social pressures and the negative portrayal of women by the media.

I was being raised a pink girl who wanted to live in a blue-centred world, because that world meant I wouldn't have to do the things that aligned with what society expected of my gender. It meant I wouldn't have to pretend I enjoyed shopping or explain why I enjoyed reading *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Fortune* instead of *Teen Magazine*, *InStyle*, and *Vogue*. It also meant I didn't have to defend my desire to study abroad or why I was determined to have a successful career. Thankfully, my parents looked at their sons and daughters through one equal, gender-neutral lens when it came to their expectations about our education. They didn't expect any different from my two brothers than they did of my sister and I other than hard work and dedication in the pursuit of knowledge.

You see, experiencing childhood with such an agreement meant I was fortunate to gain the freedom to access education *without* gender-based limitations. Because I was granted the freedom to learn, my life was able to take off. For many children, we very well know that's where their story prematurely ends. By placing one gender on a high pedestal and the other in a quiet space behind a veil, children's guardians often unwittingly become the first gatekeepers standing in the way of their social, emotional, and cognitive development.

But we know parents aren't the only ones who act as gatekeepers. Family, friends, teachers, story book authors, journalists, photographers, toy designers, writers and directors of movies and TV shows, marketers, advertisers, everyone has an opinion, definition, and in some cases a

financial interest, they want to impose about how children should be raised as *either* boys or girls. There is little tolerance or acceptance for anyone who doesn't belong in those boxes.

Historically, gender inequality may have fallen under the guise of culture and tradition, but I believe it's time to distinguish between what those mean. Tradition, by definition, is "the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation", while gender inequality is the "unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender." It's one thing for us to celebrate traditions like graduation ceremonies; it's another to celebrate wedding ceremonies when those getting married should be pursuing their high school diplomas.

It's something else entirely when so-called "modern" pop culture pinkifies girls, assuming they are only interested or capable of partaking in superficial activities. Or when it over-masculinizes boys, claiming they are not interested in, or even capable of, caring for others and portrays them as dominant and violent.

Step into a kids' store today and it's impossible not to see the division of toys into pink and blue aisles. We must acknowledge this isn't just a separation of plastic. It initiates the separation of the sexes, classifying genders and perpetuating stereotypes, batteries sold separately. You're either pink *or* blue. Soft *or* strong. Incapable *or* competent. Inhibited *or* free.

Amplifying society's culture and traditions, this pattern is perpetually ingrained by those with the loudest voice, the media. With the introduction of social media, every other person has joined the discussion. In one way or another, those voices also influence how parents and children see what boys and girls should say or do.

Kids' exposure to the media used to be limited to ad campaigns and TV commercials. Laptops, tablets, and smartphones have let these messages infiltrate to younger and younger children. Very few gatekeepers stand in the way when parents place technology in kids' hands to entertain themselves instead of spending quality time together. And the media isn't exactly in the habit of asking for permission about what it presents to toddlers and children. It decides what it wants them to see as 'normal' ways of behaving as girls or boys or of interacting with other genders. My generation was spared the increasing bombardment of selfies from friends and celebrities glamorizing collar bones, thigh gaps, and bikini bridges on Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. I was spared the continuous, unwelcome intrusion of those images and their social-emotional repercussions that plague millions of youth today.

So what are children witnessing as 'normal' today? The constant theme presented is one that diminishes the value of girls to sexual objects who idolize princesses and place their fate in the hands of prince charming. It's one that portrays boys as powerful and superior, while prohibiting them from developing characteristics likened in any way as feminine or girly. These pressures rob children of the opportunity to grow into healthy adults by affecting how their brains are wired from infancy.

Girls are wired to be hyper-sexualized and objectified. The impact of this becomes apparent years later when they perform according to the stereotypes they were raised with. They drop out of activities at younger ages and begin to act in alignment with their so-called inability to

master subjects like science and math. The danger that lies in an entire generation of girls who grow up waiting to be rescued by prince charming makes them more vulnerable to violence and less motivated to aspire to reach positions of power and leadership themselves.

Boys aren't better off as they are deterred from being caring towards others or from expressing their feelings and insecurities. They're admonished for crossing lines society feels belong to the female sex, fearing they won't grow up to be manly enough. Their over-masculinization by society pressures them to prioritize their careers over their families. Financial productivity becomes their defining role as men and valued more than their role as fathers.

These unhealthy demands placed on either sex inhibit their skills and hinder our social and economic progress. If children don't grow up witnessing another sex's capabilities or aren't exposed to each other's ideas and creativity during their upbringing, how can we expect boardrooms or governments to be an equal representation of genders?

Looking back, while adults questioned why I had the kind of ambitions I did *despite* being a girl, in return, I questioned why I needed to allow my gender be a limitation in my life? Identifying as a girl was one thing, having to live by society's imposed idea of girlhood was another.

To be clear, I am not here to give a voice for one specific gender; that would do a disservice to the fight for equality I stand advocating for today.

What I am here for, first and foremost, is to advocate for the rights of all children.

I'm here to tell you that it's time we positively disrupt our ideas about culture and traditions. Why? Because by believing they are one and the same, we continue to allow ourselves to be passive participants of customs and beliefs that infringe on children's rights.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child does not talk about one gender's rights as superior to all others. Girls' rights are not secondary, they are children's rights. Boys' rights matter just as much as girls' do, similarly to the rights of every lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered child. We have a responsibility to act on behalf of the vulnerable and give them the voice they need.

There are many ways we can do this.

First, let's focus our efforts on prevention, to avoid needing intervention. We cannot keep repeating the same patterns and expect different results.

We can't expect future female leaders out of girls who grew up playing with sexualized dolls while being fed the unrealistic and unattainable realities of princess fairy tales through every medium possible. We can't expect respectful men out of boys who grew up witnessing the sexualized objectification of women. We can't expect caring men out of boys who were taught to equate their masculinity with violence and superiority over the opposite sex.

If you want a community where husbands help fold laundry, cook for the family, and care for their children, then help boys identify and express their emotions, and allow them to explore their imaginations with kitchen supplies just as much as they do with trucks. If you want a community where women become scientists, engineers, and programmers, to be able to break down glass ceilings, and to lead our nations into the future, then let girls play with dirt and build block towers, help them learn to code, and let them lead without being called bossy. It starts there.

Think back to your own childhood and remember how moments of gender inequality felt like to you. Use those experiences to help you find your voice as an advocate for children's rights. Instead of shaming other parents, advocate for their sons who want to wear tutus and daughters who want to play football, even if yours don't.

Second, we must take advantage of the changed nature in which the media interacts with us. What used to be a one-sided conversation has shifted to a dialogue.

No we cannot ignore the downsides of social media, with its ever-increasing imposition on children's space and time, or especially their vulnerability to cyber-bullying. But I would like us to look at the beauty of these platforms. Children can be taught to use, not be used by the media. Parents have a choice and can be vocal about what they do or don't want their children to be exposed to.

Whether it's through Twitter and the power of sharing information with the click of a button or the rapid spread of viral content, we're seeing empowered communities around the world collectively shame the demeaning ways in which the media speaks of boys, girls, and women. Join them.

Third, reflect on the Convention of the Rights of the Child and on the recommendations made throughout this conference and ask yourselves this:

What gender equality grade would you, your schools, and your countries get? Are your institutions, academic or otherwise, hubs of fairness and equity or hubs that perpetuate stereotypes?

I'd like you to once again imagine a box.

Is it strong and sturdy?

Is it labelled or will it allow the person placed in it to claim their own identity?

What kind of environment have you prepared for it?

Is it on a high pedestal or safely protected behind a canopy?

Is it suitable for all children or merely one gender?

What kinds of hopes, dreams, and expectations do you have for them?

What kinds of qualities, skills, and competences will you foster?

My challenge to you is to be exemplary. Create a box so children can grow out of it not as gendered people forever trapped in roles defined for them, but as fully developed individuals able to cultivate their own identities.

Thank you.