

**Tarja Halonen, Former President of the Republic of Finland**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure that you have organized this conference in Finland and for me to be here opening this conference.

We have gathered here today to find ways to reduce gender segregation and to combat gender stereotypes.

All nations have their own traditions, and gender stereotypes are part of it. But it is good to remember that they are made by people and can be reformed by people. The world is not the same everywhere. The equal rights for women to vote and to stand for office were received in the first big wave in Finland (in 1906) and in other Nordic countries a few years later. In many other countries the system is still in the process of developing. Formal legal rights are a good start, but not enough to win in the elections. For this you need money and networks.

The Nordic welfare society is, in my view, largely the result of both men and women participating in political decision-making and in working life. The society has had to cooperate with families, so that children, the elderly and others in need of care receive adequate services.

As family sizes are getting smaller, a quality early childhood education system can have various positive roles: it means a lengthening of learning opportunities, playmates of the same age for children and knowledge on children's safety. The early childhood education and preschool system in Finland has functioned excellently as a preparation for compulsory education, which starts only at the age of 7.

Rights and duties have not and are not even now always been shared equally in the family. Responsibilities are more for the woman and rights for the man. This is why efforts to combine work outside home and family affairs is so far mostly the problem of women, and solutions should be tailored to this situation.

But I would not hesitate to say that our men could participate also more in caring work without being afraid of losing their masculinity. For instance, combining work and family life in a harmonic manner has improved through changing the maternity leave to parental leave. Luckily young men are better than their fathers.

Women reach quite a good education in many countries, but working life often needs still special attention. Stereotypical subject choices are still very common: Girls tend to leave out mathematics and natural sciences when these are not mandatory and boys choose the typically male-dominated fields of education. This leads to clear gender segregation in the working life where women work in the areas of health care, education and other services and men in the fields of industry and technology. This has also clear consequences for salary systems and for the efforts to improve work and family life balance.

Thus, reducing gender stereotypes in education also leads to a more balanced working life.

Already in the Millennium Development Goals education was considered as one of the important means to achieve equality and social justice. We have advanced a lot in primary education in the last 15 years. The next step will be secondary education, and improving the quality of education. I emphasize the importance of teachers:

The teachers' own education should be good (university level, I hope) and they should also have the opportunity of life-long learning. Teachers work with children and young people, but they should also have the possibility to have their own family.

In my own country Finland education is highly respected. It has a long tradition, and the profession of a teacher is very popular. It is in fact hard to become a teacher due to competition. Teachers' salaries are not very high, but decent. Therefore sometimes we lose teachers to other sectors – but luckily not too often yet. The risk exists for this to happen in the future, if teaching becomes less popular.

In many countries there are more and more women in the educational sector. This has been considered to be one of the reasons why teachers' salaries are not higher. If the woman makes the job, it cannot be too important, some people think. It is not right, but more mixed labour markets makes discrimination at least more difficult. Equal pay is a rule in most of the countries, but this does not help in sectorial discrimination.

Thus, a common goal could be to achieve a more balanced representation of women and men as teachers. At the same time, it is important to make sure that teachers, regardless of their own gender, are equipped with gender-sensitivity by the educational system. These two objectives should guide us when we develop our educational systems at national, regional and local level.

It is important to teach children to read and write and know mathematics. But it is at least as important to teach them to know their own human rights. I also emphasize the need for comprehensive sexuality education in schools. Sexuality education needs to be age-appropriate, but it is important for children to know their rights concerning their own bodies, and for adolescents to learn about sexuality so that they can make their own choices concerning their sexuality and childbearing free of violence, coercion or discrimination.

As parents, decision-makers, teachers and civil servants, we all have to work so that girls and boys can go to school freely and trust to be safe there.

Dear audience,

Parents, teachers, educators and other professionals working with children and young people have an important role in shaping the values of the next generations. We all, and perhaps especially teachers, have a significant role in educating children and young students for the future.

I hope that all of us as adults encourage children and young people to look at the world with open eyes and help them to be more tolerant and more active in the society. Open the eyes of children to see the different kinds of nations, different kinds of traditions and different kinds of people.

I wish you all a fruitful conference!