

Krista Kiuru, Minister of Education, Science and Communications, Republic of Finland

Dear Guests

Welcome to Finland and welcome to our capital, Helsinki. Helsinki has been the capital of Finland since Finland became part of Russia, in 1812. At the time, Helsinki had only 4,000 inhabitants whereas today it is one of the biggest cities in the Nordic countries. Paasitorni, where we are convened today, has a special place in the history of Finland especially in connection with the Civil War that Finland went through after it became independent in 1917. This place has also played a very important role in the workers' movement in Helsinki and in Finland for one hundred years.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Finland has been historically regarded as one of the model countries in the field of equality and human rights. Finland gained its own national parliament in 1906, when the country was still part of Russia, and both men and women were given the right to vote and to become a candidate for parliament. Nonetheless, a certain degree of international guidance has had its place in our system. For example the current Finnish Act on Equality between Women and Men was adopted because the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women placed such demand on Finland.

There is no room for complacency with regard to equality in Finland, however. Personally I think that the biggest challenge in terms of equality between the genders is in working life structures, in the unequal distribution of child care and in gender stereotypes. Today, being here, I will focus on the latter, because gender stereotypes tend to generate problems in the other areas too.

As an organisation that is specialised in human rights, I believe it is very important that the Council of Europe has put effort into raising awareness about equality and gender stereotypes particularly in early childhood care and education. Gender stereotypes are something that I believe we all carry within ourselves to a greater or lesser degree. This means we all should constantly question the stereotypes and prejudices we have, however progressive we think we are. The fact is, I think it is almost impossible for a person to be totally free of prejudices and stereotypes.

As the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has stated in its recommendations on gender mainstreaming in education, gender stereotypes undermine the human rights of both men and women. For example in Finland, boys are at greater risk of dropping out from education, while young women face more challenges in getting a permanent job. Stereotypical male and female social roles limit opportunities for everyone to fulfil their potential as human beings. This also has negative repercussions on competitiveness in our society and in our economy. So the work we do to achieve greater equality is not something that is taken away from the work we do to create more jobs and a better economy. More equality will bring more welfare, more jobs and economic growth.

Dear Guests

Equality has one peculiarity. If it doesn't concern us all, then there's no equality at all. What I mean by this is that we should never reach a point where we believe that we have worked hard enough for equality. We need to make equality between men and women one of the principal goals in international development policy, in foreign policy, and in our work in all international organisations.

The Finnish Parliament is currently working on a Government bill to change the Gender Equality Act, so as to make it stronger. Firstly, some of the amendments are designed to improve the protection of gender minorities against discrimination, and to promote gender equality. The purpose is to broaden the current prohibitions against gender discrimination so that they also apply to discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression. Secondly, the Government proposes that the obligation to prepare gender equality plans be extended to comprehensive schools, too. The planning obligation already applies to vocational educational institutions, general upper secondary schools, polytechnics and universities.

The current National Core Curricula in Finland include equality as one of the main goals, but lack concrete tools to promote equality and to challenge gender stereotypes. The National Board of Education is currently renewing the National Core Curricula for basic education. The Board has decided to strengthen the aspect of gender and gender equality in the core curriculum. All subject groups in basic education have been instructed to address the promotion of gender equality in subject-specific descriptions in the core curriculum.

The essential objective is that by using these concrete tools, gender awareness and promoting gender equality are incorporated into teaching and the national core curriculum. The overall objective is a shift to gender-sensitive education.

The perspectives put forward regarding the National Core Curriculum are:

- 1) Reducing inequality faced by both girls and women and boys and men,
- 2) Reducing gendered attitudes towards any and all subjects and their learning outcomes and
- 3) Understanding the diversity of gender and conveying this understanding through teaching.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Changing the National Core Curriculum is a big step forward but we also need to focus on the local level and on teaching material. The Finnish National Board of Education has informed the Ministry of Education and Culture that it carries out regular negotiations with the producers of learning materials and also addresses the question of reducing gender stereotypes in textbooks in these negotiations.

Finnish basic education has been ranked as one of the best in the world, but we are seeing declining learning outcomes and greater inequality between schools and pupils. We see problems arising mostly from the point of view of socio-economic inequality, but there is also a strong gender element. Hence I have set up an expert group that consists of experts in education to draft proposals for the future of our basic education system. One of the subgroups deals with the question of gender equality.

The Ministry of Education and Culture has chosen equality as one of its main goals. We have already twice distributed over 20 million euros in state funds to promoting equality in basic education to the providers of education. Gender equality is one of the areas to which these funds have been allocated.

The next steps should be to reform the education of teachers and the early childhood education and care staff so that equality and awareness of gender stereotypes can be handled better.

Dear Guests

I wish you a fruitful and pleasant conference and enjoy our beautiful capital city. Thank you.

