



CONCEPT NOTE

INTERNATIONAL HELVI SIPILÄ SEMINAR 2026 AT CSW: ADVANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Time: 11 March 2026 at 16.00 - 17.30, followed by a reception

Venue: Ukrainian Institute in America, 2 E 79th Street, New York, NY 10075

[Please register here](#)

Helvi Sipilä (1915-2009) was one of Finland's first female lawyers and the first woman to run for president of the nation. She made her most significant career as Assistant-Secretary-General of the United Nations – as the first woman in the world.

The theme of CSW70 is at the core of Helvi Sipilä's legacy – and is critical to the empowerment of women around the world. This year, the Helvi Sipilä seminar will be organized for the 20th time, addressing the growing disparity in gender equality which is happening world-wide at a worrying rate. It is also reflected in the decline in women's leadership positions globally. The seminar will promote full and effective participation of women in public life and decision-making and highlight the role of women as leaders in times of instability and uncertainty. The seminar will also highlight the significance of global political participation among young women, minorities, and other women in vulnerable positions. Furthermore, it will seek to identify and promote effective measures to address obstacles to women's political engagement, including hate speech and harassment. The event will also ask whether the time has come to elect a woman as the next UN Secretary-General. This year, the seminar is organized in cooperation with the [Ukrainian Institute in America](#).

BACKGROUND TO THE SEMINAR THEME

UN Women's recent publication, [Women Political leaders 2025](#) from June 2025 reveals that women's political leadership in executive positions has not only stalled - it is declining. The continued underrepresentation of women leaders in state or government leadership and in key ministerial positions is a testament to widespread barriers and insufficient and uneven commitment to gender equality in political leadership. As representatives of Finnish civil society we strongly believe that this backlash has to be tackled together locally, nationally and globally.

PROGRAMME

Moderator: **Silvia Modig**, Chair of the National Council of Women of Finland

- 16.00 Opening words
Ms. Sanni Grahn-Laasonen, Minister of Social Security in Finland
- 16.10 Keynote: **Women's access to political decision-making is a crucial question for all humankind.**
Ms. Kirsi Madi, Deputy Executive Director for Resource Management, Sustainability and Partnerships of UN Women
- 16.20 Panel Discussion: **Women's leadership in difficult times. *What can we learn from these times of growing uncertainty, pushback of women's rights and global conflicts?***
- Panelists:
Ms. Yuliya Kusher, Founder and CEO of Solo for Diamonds, Ukraine
Ms. Lushomo Thebe, YWCA Leadership cohort, YWCA Aotearoa New Zealand
Third panelist TBA
- 17.20 Closing remarks
Ms. Elina Kalkku, Permanent Representative of Finland to the UN
- 17.30 Reception

The event will be recorded, and the recording will be distributed widely through the organizing NGOs.

VENUE DETAILS

The seminar takes place at the Ukrainian Institute of America
2 E 79th Street, New York, NY 10075

The event takes place on the 2nd floor ballroom, with a staircase leading to the area. There is a small elevator in the building. Unfortunately there is no wheelchair access to the building.

SPEAKERS

Sanni Grahn-Laasonen

Minister of Social Security in Finland

Sanni Grahn-Laasonen is a Minister of Social Security in the Orpo Government in Finland since June 2023. As a minister she is responsible for key portfolios involving social security, employment and gender equality policy, as well as safety and health affairs. She has been a Member of Parliament since 2011, representing the National Coalition Party. Previously, she has held several ministerial posts, including Minister of Education (2017–2019), Minister of Education and Culture (2015–2017), and Minister of the Environment (2014–2015). She holds a Master's degree in Social Sciences and has a professional background as a journalist and Press Attaché to the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Kirsi Madi

Deputy Executive Director for Resource Management, Sustainability and Partnerships of UN Women

Kirsi Madi serves as a UN Assistant Secretary-General and UN Women Deputy Executive Director for Resource Management, Sustainability and Partnerships. She has more than 30 years of experience in international development, humanitarian action, gender equality, governance, partnerships, and organizational transformation. Over the course of her UN career—most of which she has spent with UNICEF—she has held a range of high-level positions, including Chief of Staff and Director of the Office of the UNICEF Executive Director, Secretary of the Executive Board, Deputy Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, and Chief of National Committee Relations. Prior to joining the UN, she worked in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in the field of development cooperation.

Elina Kalkku

Finland's Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Elina Kalkku has served as Finland's Permanent Representative to the United Nations since 2022. Previously she served as Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, overseeing development policy and Finland's relations with Africa and the Middle East (2015–2022). Her earlier senior roles include Director-General of the Department for the Americas and Asia (2005–2015) and Director of the Security Policy Unit (2000–2005). Throughout her diplomatic career, she has served at the Finnish Missions to the UN in New York and to NATO in Brussels, and at Finnish embassies in Madrid and Brussels. Kalkku holds Master's and Licentiate of Law degrees from the University of Helsinki, specializing in international law.

Yuliya Kusher

Founder and CEO of SOLO for Diamonds

Yuliya Kusher is an internationally certified gemologist and the founder of SOLO for Diamonds – Ukraine's first fine jewelry brand specializing in creating timeless pieces with lab-grown diamonds of the highest international standards. Yuliya has spent over 10 years working with lab-grown diamonds – a breakthrough in the jewelry world. Yuliya frequently

shares her expertise as a speaker at Ukrainian and international events and programs, including TEDx, Forbes, Al Jazeera, and others.

Lushomo Thebe

YWCA Leadership cohort, YWCA Aotearoa New Zealand

Lushomo Thebe is a trailblazer, weaving her Zambian-Kiwi heritage into the fabric of leadership. As a barrister and solicitor of the High Court, she practices at Aotearoa's leading law firm, Chapman Tripp. With over five years of governance experience, Lushomo has distinguished herself in boardrooms as a company director, trustee, and board chair, skillfully overcoming age barriers and making a significant impact. Currently, she is a Board Member on the YWCA National Board, contributing her expertise as a member of the Finance Risk and Audit Committee. In 2022, Lushomo was named on the Y25, an annual accolade celebrating 25 women under 25 who are trailblazers and change-makers in Aotearoa New Zealand.

ORGANISERS

*To commemorate Sipilä's trailblazing legacy, five Finnish women's organizations, **The Finnish Federation of Graduate Women, The National Council of Women of Finland, UN Women Finland, YWCA Finland and the Coalition of Finnish Women's Association NYTKIS** have organised the **International Helvi Sipilä Seminar** annually during the UN CSW weeks (Commission on the Status of Women). 2026 marks the 20th anniversary of the Helvi Sipilä Seminar. This year, the seminar is organized in cooperation with the [Ukrainian Institute in America](#).*

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Permanent Mission of Finland
to the United Nations