

Remarks by
President of the Republic of Finland

Tarja Halonen

at the Women's International Forum in New York on 15 March 2011

I want to begin by expressing my deepest sympathies and condolences to the people and Government of Japan, and in particular to those who lost family and friends in the natural disasters last week. The on-going crisis is on all our minds.

It is a great pleasure to be invited to the Women's International Forum. I appreciate the work of the Forum in promoting understanding and mutual appreciation among members of the diplomatic community, the United Nations Secretariat and the United Nations community at large.

Last week, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the International Women's Day. The power of women's networking is crucial in today's world. This Forum gives also the opportunity to discuss the empowerment of women in different countries.

Equality benefits the whole society. Women are the half of the world's population. We must make sure that all the human resources are available for the development of our societies. Women are still majority of the poorest and least educated in the world. They are in the most vulnerable position during crises. But I underline they are the resource we have not yet benefited fully.

In my remarks today, I will focus on the activities of the Panel and share my views on sustainable development.

The UN Secretary-General established the Global Sustainability Panel last August and asked President Jacob Zuma of South Africa and myself to co-chair it. Half of the panel members are women. Members represent various countries and fields, including current and former Heads of State and Government, ministers and representatives of business sector and civil society.

The composition of the Panel is well-balanced. North and South are equally represented. The gender balance comes true in the membership. Both business world and civil society are represented. We have both experience and new insights. What is also important that there is a sense of a common purpose and a genuine will to work together to achieve results. After two Panel meetings, I am confident our Panel has all that.

The mandate of the Panel is “to formulate a new blueprint for sustainable growth and low-carbon prosperity for all on a planet under increasing strain”.

The Panel agrees that there is no need to redefine sustainable development itself. The concept of sustainable development, as it was established by the international community some 20 years ago, is still valid. What is now needed is implementation. We concentrate on how to reach global sustainability, understood as a resilient planet that supports its people’s needs.

The Panel will reconvene in May in Helsinki. While the Panel will continue to reach out to major stakeholders and regions, the flow of information, views and opinions to the Panel continues.

The world needs an understanding of global development which is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable. The wellbeing of humankind must go hand in hand with the wellbeing of nature.

Economic growth needs to be green, equitable and inclusive. It must create jobs, promote opportunities for decent work and a better life for everyone, for this generation as well as for future generations.

We need local, national and global cooperation. I have a feeling that we should examine whether there is a need to adjust institutional structures at global as well as regional and local levels. However, nation states continue to be key actors. It is also important to include NGOs, private enterprises as well as groups and individuals.

The United Nations – as the only true global organization – must play a leading role in global issues.

Among the three pillars of sustainable development, the social one has been lagging behind. Recently, the social pillar has been getting more attention in the policy discussion. I noticed this in the World Economic Forum in Davos in the end of January. Creation of decent jobs is a key in combining economic and environmental sustainability to social one. There cannot be inclusive growth without jobs. This seems to get more understanding as a result of recent political uprisings in Northern Africa.

We need to do much more to combat discrimination and exclusion. The Nordic countries are very often ranked to the top in education, in social protection, in competitiveness – and, indeed, in sustainability. We have relatively high tax rates in global comparisons - that is true. But investing in people and prevention of environmental degradation pays.

From women’s point of view, Finland is a pioneer in many respects. In 1906, Finland was the first country in the world to give full political rights to women, simultaneously with men. From the start, Finnish women and men have worked together in building a welfare state. Our experience is positive.

Contribution by women is perhaps one of the reasons why Nordic countries are caring societies – welfare societies.

Empowerment of women is also crucial in order to build sustainable development in a balanced way. Women who are often responsible for everyday choices in domestic life play a key role in developing green economy.

Poverty often has the face of a woman. Women work hard everywhere in the world but, more often than men, they are employed in informal sectors, in other words, without an employment contract and the payment of taxes, and lacking sickness insurance and pension security. They also work in agriculture along with their husbands without own income or ownership of land.

Economic equality is still far away. Even though women perform two thirds of all work in the world, they only earn one tenth of the income. Women own only one per cent of all property in the world and less than two per cent of all land.

I have been very happy to note that there is an increased awareness of gender perspectives in peace-building and in crisis management. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security was an important step forward. The International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment – which I had the honour to co-convene together with President of Liberia Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in 2009 – sent out a strong message about the need to fully implement the Resolution.

Gender equality is also a key dimension in reaching the UN Millennium Development Goals. Most of the Goals, when implemented, will improve specifically the situation of women and girls. It is widely understood that women are a resource.

Education is one of the key objectives of the UN Millennium Development Goals. The World Economic Forum has identified girls' education as one of the most effective means to improve the economy of a developing country. Education is the key secret behind success.

Climate change and its effects are very much also a gender equality issue. Climate change will affect especially seriously the lives and livelihood of women, but women can be powerful actors in combating it.

The viewpoint of women must be taken into account in all matters related to climate change.

It is also important that we encourage women to influence the new climate change regime – to be active so that the gender aspect will be recognised and respected. But we need the commitment and contribution of both women and men to succeed.

Let me wish you all the best of success in your important work.