

Our honoured guests, dear colleagues,

This congress concentrates on future, but lets have some words about the past.

We Finns tend to think that we are front-runners in the field of equal rights. And looking back to our “mothers”, we can acknowledge that they have achieved a lot. But the history behind us is the history of first steps. In Finland, it is less than 100 years ago that we women got the right to vote – though being among the first in the world - and coincidentally it was almost the same time, than the first woman started to study law in the University of Helsinki.

From that point on women lawyers have been taking those so-called first steps:

- Right to practice law 1910
- Right to enter public office 1926
- First female to be nominated as a judge 1946
- First female on foreign ministry 1952
- First female professor of law 1961 and so on, and so on

And we women are still taking those first steps: Finland’s first president of our gender was nominated few years ago and this year we got our first female prime minister in Finland. Both, I’m glad to say, are women lawyers. And our president Tarja Halonen supports this event.

Finland’s Women Lawyers Association was founded 1945. At that point there were only 68 women lawyers in Finland. Today the estimation is that in Finland there are about 6800 women lawyers. About 60 years ago our founding mothers had faced the problems of women at work life and in the society, and they sought a way to improve their status in the society. There was, indeed, a need for own “club” such as the men have had hundreds of years before.

The founding idea is valid even nowadays: women lawyers wanted to have a network, from which they could get support in their careers. Like we know, those “first steps” were not always very easy to take. Those undermining thoughts and talks from the male colleagues were, and still sometimes are, quite hurtful.

Women Lawyer Association had from the start a strong view that things must be done to help women in society, especially women lawyers in their careers. What was needed was improvement of equality, promotion of women’s social status in society and looking after the economic interests of women. Also from the beginning the members of our association have been very active to have an impact on legislation. One of the first legal topics handled by our association was the abortion law, which stated, that abortion was illegal. Active statements did not necessarily cause any actions: for example it took more than 20 years to change the law and make the abortion legal in Finland.

So what has happened in 60 years: do we still need to work towards equality. Unfortunately: the answer is Yes. There are still things to be done. The aims of our association are still quite valid. After 100 years we are still taking the first steps, though some of us, are lucky to take our status in work life and in the society as granted. We have travelled long way, but I know, we have not yet reached the final stop.