

ANNIVERSARY EVENT

# 30 Years, 1 Journey: For All Women and Girls in Europe and Central Asia

May 8, 2025 | Helsinki, Finland

## Masters of Ceremony

**SHADIA RASK**

Shadia Rask is an award-winning speaker, columnist and professional in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in Finland. She holds a PhD in public health, and her research interests cover different aspects of immigration, social sustainability, and inclusion in society and working life. Shadia Rask was honored with the State Award for Public Information for her constructive and research-based contributions to public discourse on racism and inequality. She writes a column for the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) and serves as a Board Member of UN Women Finland.

**ANDRÉ NOËL CHAKER**

André Noël Chaker is one of Finland's leading business speakers and writers. His background in international sports and business has provided a strong foundation for his contributions to many international forums and conferences. Over the past ten years, André Noël Chaker has spoken at over 1000 business events in Finland and abroad.

He has had a long career in international sports. At a young age, he led two major global scientific organizations in sports (ICSSPE, ECSS – The International Council of Sports Science and Physical Education and the European College of Sports Science). He authored two books on international sports law and governance for the Council of Europe in 1998 and 2004. He was instrumental in creating the Women in Tech conference series in Finland and hosted the 6th IWG Conference on Women and Sport “Lead the Change” in Helsinki in 2014. He is currently the Chairperson of MySpeaker, the fastest-growing speaker bureau in Europe, and the developer of Rhetorich AI, a leading AI platform for boosting communication skills at work.

Opening remarks



**BELÉN SANZ LUQUE**

UN Women Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia

Belén Sanz has more than 20 years of experience in development policies, with special emphasis on gender equality and women's rights policies and evaluation of public policies in international fields.

Prior to joining UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Belén Sanz served as UN Women's Representative in Mexico between 2017 and 2024, where she led flagship initiatives to advance gender equality in partnership with Mexico, such as the historic Generation Equality Forum, the Global Alliance for Care, and the Spotlight Initiative to end femicide. Between 2013 and 2017, Belén Sanz served as UN Women's Representative in Colombia, where she accompanied the historic peace process in Colombia, supporting women's participation and promoting a gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding. During February - August 2016, she served as the Resident Coordinator, a.i., of the United Nations System in Colombia.

Before joining UN Women Colombia, Belén Sanz served as the First Evaluation Director of UNIFEM, and later UN Women, from the organization's headquarters in New York. In addition to this, she assumed the role of the Chair of the United Nations Evaluation Group, promoting a human rights and gender approach in the United Nations system evaluation, which earned her many awards.

Prior to joining the United Nations, she worked as Head of Development Policy Evaluation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Spain, where she led the development of the Evaluation System in Spanish cooperation, and previously as Advisor of gender programs and policies in the same entity.



**SANNI GRAHN-LAASONEN**

Minister of Social Security, Finland

Minister of Social Security Sanni Grahn-Laasonen is responsible for matters covered by the Department for Insurance and Social Security, the Department for Work and Gender Equality and the Department for Safety, Security and Health.

Sanni Grahn-Laasonen, born on 4 May 1983 in Forssa, has served as a Member of Parliament since 2011 and as a minister in three governments. She served as Minister of Education in 2017–2019, as Minister of Education and Culture in 2015–2017 and as Minister of the Environment in 2014–2015.

Grahn-Laasonen holds a Master's degree in Social Sciences. During her political career, she has also served as deputy party leader of the National Coalition Party and held numerous positions of trust, such as the chair of the County Council of the Kanta-Häme Wellbeing Services County and the chair of the board of the New Children's Hospital Foundation.

Grahn-Laasonen is a member of Forssa City Council.

Prior to her election to Parliament, Grahn-Laasonen worked as a journalist, Stockholm correspondent and news editor as well as Press Attaché to the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

She lives with her husband and two children. In her free time, Grahn-Laasonen enjoys many kinds of cultural activities and outdoor pursuits, and she likes to read and visit second-hand shops.

## Opening remarks



### JAANA HIRSIKANGAS

Executive Director, UN Women Finland

Jaana Hirsikangas is the executive director of UN Women Finland. Among other things, she has worked for three years at the UN-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica, completed a professional development certificate in peace and conflict prevention and resolution in Bangkok, Thailand, and participated in the prestigious National Defence Course in Helsinki, Finland.

With an academic background in social sciences and gender studies and international work experience across four continents, Jaana Hirsikangas has a deep understanding of development, gender equality, and sustainable development. A passionate advocate for women's rights, she was named Responsible Influencer of the Year in 2023.

## Keynote speech



### TARJA HALONEN

Former President of Finland, participant in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

Tarja Halonen served as the 11th President of the Republic of Finland from 2000 to 2012. She was Finland's first female president. Halonen's political career in Finland spans over four decades. She was elected to Parliament in 1979. She held the office of Minister of Social Affairs and Health, Minister of Justice, and Minister for Foreign Affairs. During her Presidency, she served as co-chair of the United Nations Millennium Summit and the UN High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability.

President Halonen is well known for her long and extensive experience in civil society and her interest in human rights issues, especially regarding women's rights, LGBT rights, and minority rights. She has played an important role in strengthening gender equality and, according to her, active involvement and leadership of women are crucial. As the then Foreign Minister of Finland, she was the Head of the Finnish delegation at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

President Halonen continues to be very active in the field of social rights and on the UN Agenda 2030. Among other duties, she is currently a member of the UN's Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation and UNCCD Land Ambassador.

Let's Talk: Rights, Equality, Empowerment



**ADINA NIVUKOSKI**

Young advocate for women's rights, Finland

Adina Nivukoski is a 24-year-old columnist and the UN Youth Delegate for 2024–2025. She is a passionate advocate for gender equality, education, and human rights. Her experience includes work with UNESCO, the OECD, UN Women Finland, and the Finnish League for Human Rights.

Nivukoski began her career as president of Finland's largest voluntary student organization and has worked as a journalist during her studies. Currently, she writes columns on equality and global justice and is one of the youngest-ever columnists at Finland's public broadcaster. She led the gender focal point group in the OECD Youthwise advisory group and has been especially active in promoting girls' education in Finland and globally.



**AITBEK AMANGELDI**

Human rights advocate and policy reformer, Kazakhstan

Aitbek Amangeldi is a Kazakhstani human rights advocate and policy reformer with a background in public administration and information technology. After more than a decade working in government digital transformation projects, he shifted his focus to civil society and legal reform in response to the growing challenges of gender-based violence in Kazakhstan.

Drawing on his experience in systems thinking and policy implementation, Amangeldi founded a national volunteer-based support network for survivors of domestic violence, offering legal aid, shelter, psychological support, and public advocacy. He led the grassroots campaign for the adoption of the "Saltanat Law" — a legislative initiative to address stalking and domestic abuse — which received over 150,000 public signatures and drew nationwide support. Today, he continues to work at the intersection of civic activism, legislative reform, and digital empowerment, collaborating with state institutions, international organizations, and grassroots communities to advance gender equality and protect vulnerable populations.



**BEYZA DOĞUÇ**

Musician, writer, and IT specialist, Türkiye

Beyza Doğuç is known for integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into her artistic work. A graduate of Ankara University with a degree in Journalism, she has released over 40 songs and authored more than 100 works. Her album "Kitaplık" features adaptations of eight classic literary works, showcasing her innovative approach to blending literature and music. Beyond music, Doğuç has authored a novel titled "Koda," in which she utilized AI to develop one of the main characters, reflecting her commitment to merging technology with traditional storytelling.

**Let's Talk: Rights, Equality, Empowerment**



**KAMILLA SULTANOVA**

Award-winning keynote speaker and DEI-expert, Finland

Kamilla Sultanova is a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) consultant, award-winning public speaker, and experienced event moderator. She regularly engages CEOs, HR directors, and policymakers across Nordic and global platforms and hosts the podcast Suomi+, bringing visibility to diverse leaders across Finland.

A champion for women, youth, mentoring, and volunteering, Sultanova's unique career path - from a container trader to a Nordic DEI changemaker - reflects her ability to bridge cultures and inspire meaningful action. Born in Karshi, Uzbekistan, her dynamic journey spans the U.S. FLEX exchange programme, studying and breaking barriers in Denmark's maritime sector, and leading inclusive initiatives in Finland.

Her work in Uzbekistan includes running her first half-marathon for inclusion in Samarkand, being instrumental in establishing the World Economic Forum's first Global Shapers Tashkent Hub, and organizing Global dignity events for Uzbek youth and launching the webinar series #Uzbekistanwithafemalevoice.

Recognized by the Obama Foundation, she is an alumna of networks such as Central Eurasian Leadership Alliance (CELA), European Young Leaders, and German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Inclusion Leaders. She is a trusted voice advancing equity and collaboration across sectors and geographies.



**KHRYSTYNA KIT**

Chairwoman, Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association "JurFem," Ukraine

Khrystyna Kit is the Chairwoman of the Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association "JurFem", a lawyer and a human rights defender. In addition, she's the coordinator of the expert group on conflict-related sexual violence at the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine, and co-chair of the sub-pillar group "Access to Justice and Responsibility" within the Inter-Agency Working Group on Combating Sexual Violence Related to Russia's Armed Aggression against Ukraine and Assistance to Survivors (IWG).

For more than fifteen years, Khrystyna Kit has been an advocate for women's rights. In 2017, she was one of the initiators and co-founders of the Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association "JurFem," a non-government organization of over 350 women lawyers across Ukraine. "JurFem" mission is to create a gender-responsive legal environment and to improve legal community's understanding of national and international gender equality legislation.

Khrystyna Kit is actively involved in the development and implementation of legislation and policies; training of social services providers, police officers, judges, and lawyers on violence against women and women's rights; as well as conducting monitoring and research on different aspects of violence against women. Through her work, Khrystyna Kit strengthens the capacity of the legal community - including attorneys, prosecutors, and investigators - to respond effectively to sexual violence, including conflict-related sexual violence.



**ELLA CANCARA**

Vice-Chair of the Generation Equality Youth Group, Finland

Ella Cancara serves as the vice-chair of Finland's Generation Equality youth group, where she has been an active member since 2021. The work of the Generation Equality youth group focuses on themes of technology and gender equality. They collaborate closely with the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as Finnish technology companies, and NGOs. Cancara studies social sciences at Tampere University, where her academic and advocacy work centers on human rights, youth empowerment, and intersectionality.

Let's Talk: Rights, Equality, Empowerment



**LEANNE ELLIOTT YOUNG**

Cultural commentator and co-founder of the Institute of Digital Fashion, UK

Leanne Elliott Young is the CEO and Co-Founder of the Institute of Digital Fashion (IoDF): Culture-Led. Tech-driven. Powered by Insight. As CEO, Young has built IoDF into a global leader in innovation, delivering 7 industry world firsts.

She was voted 'Number 1 Woman in Web3 Europe' (2023) and is noted as the "mastermind behind fashion's transition to the metaverse" (Vogue). Young founded IoDF as an emblem for change — using technology as a democratic tool for systemic transformation.

Young is a C-suite executive, female founder, thought leader and academic driving infrastructure pivots and transformative business use cases. She amplifies the message that technology is not a trend, but a tool for change. She is widely recognized for tackling industry-wide issues — patriarchal structures in tech, lack of diversity, insipid fashion-tech activations, and sustainable innovation. Her mission is to empower creators and move fashion from legacy consumerism toward co-ownership and equity-driven systems

She advises at the government level on the economic potential of Web3 for UK trade and is a regular keynote speaker across global platforms including Davos, LEAP (Saudi), Snap Global Summit, Vogue Business, and Cambridge Union. Recognized for its policy influence and thought leadership, IoDF sets the standard for cultural innovation, sustainability, Web3 integration, and inclusivity.

IoDF's work on Digital Product Passports (DPP) launches in spring 2025, designed to turn compliance into ROI for EU and UK SMEs.

Clients include Meta, Snap Inc., Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Prada, Balenciaga, Adidas, Selfridges, Farfetch, BFC, and the Barbican.

IoDF is partnered with Snap Inc., collaborates with Epic Games, and works with Epam Systems on scalable DPP solutions. It also sits on TikTok's Luxury Collective, is a Women of Davos member.

Accolades include: Vogue Business: 100 Innovators; Vogue Poland: Global Vogue Leader; Vogue Greece: Industry Changemaker; Futures Lab: Top 100 Innovators; Global Top 100 Women of the Future in Emerging Tech; Vogue Singapore: Top 100 Web3 Talent, TaFF Innovation Lead & Prize Judge; Advisory board member: Soho House, AUCart, Young Women's Trust, 50m, Her Stories; Metaverse Council member; Forbes Technology Council.

Her writing and commentary appear in Vogue, Forbes, BOF, Dazed, i-D, Jing Daily, The Face, CNN, and The Guardian. Academic roles include UAL, CSM, LCF, Parsons, Harvard, Institute Marangoni, and Cambridge University.

Let's Talk: Rights, Equality, Empowerment



**VENERO MELUA**

Activist and stand-up performer, Georgia

Venero Melua is a 28-year-old feminist activist, content creator, and digital communications expert advocating for the rights of internally displaced persons (IDP), rural women, and young women in Georgia. With a background in social sciences from the Free University of Tbilisi, she has led impactful initiatives at the intersection of technology, media, and gender equality.

Venero Melua has successfully implemented multiple projects focused on social inclusion and human rights. She has also played a key role in Tbilisi Pride as a Content Manager, where she develops compelling content on LGBTQ+ rights, health, and global political issues.

As the Co-founder & Director of Femea.ge, Georgia's leading feminist informational platform, she has initiated research on the collective memory of IDP women from Abkhazia, produced intergenerational dialogue series, and directed a short documentary on displaced women's experiences.

Beyond media and advocacy, Venero Melua is a stand-up comedian and founder of 'Local Maisels', Georgia's first feminist comedy collective. Her comedy, which challenges gender norms and political narratives, has amassed over a million views across social platforms. She is also a content creator, with an audience of 13.5K followers on TikTok and more than 4K followers on Facebook, raising awareness about feminism, disinformation, and socio-political issues. With a passion for digital activism, media strategy, and feminist storytelling, Venero Melua continues to challenge societal norms and drive meaningful change through her work.



**ZHAKLIN LEKATARI**

Journalist and activist, Albania

Zhaklin Lekatari is an Albanian journalist, activist, feminist, and influencer with 104K followers. She advocates for human rights and gender equality and has been vocal about breaking societal taboos, contributing to public discussions on women's rights, sexuality, and freedom of expression in Albania. Zhaklin Lekatari has worked as a journalist and media personality, often addressing sensitive topics related to gender norms, feminism, and sexual empowerment. She is also active on social media and other platforms, where she promotes progressive values and challenges traditional mindsets. She is the founder of <https://tabu.al/> - a platform offering information and news about sexual education. The Instagram profile @tabublog has 40,5K followers.

Closing remarks



**KATRI ELINA VIINIKKA**

Ambassador for Gender Equality, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finland

Ambassador Katri Viinikka holds the position of Ambassador for Gender Equality at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs ( of Finland since September 1, 2018. Prior to this, she was Ambassador of Finland to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Permanent Representative of Finland to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) from 2015 to 2018.

Previously, Ambassador Viinikka served as Director for United Nations and General Global Affairs in the Political Department of the Finnish MFA from 2010 to 2015. She has also held the position of Chief of Cabinet of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and served at Finnish embassies in Brussels, Berlin, and Bonn. She began her career at the MFA of Finland in 1992.



**HANNA-MARI MANNINEN**

Chair of the Board of UN Women Finland

Hanna-Mari Manninen is Partner and Head of Strategic Advisory at Dittmar & Indrenius Law Firm. Previously, she worked at another Finnish law firm (2006-2010) and at the Nordic Investment Bank (2011). Hanna-Mari Manninen also completed an internship at the UN Headquarters in 2005.

As an attorney, Hanna-Mari Manninen advises leading corporations, including their boards, on corporate governance, compliance, and sustainability – often in the context of significant transactions, crisis management, or regulatory matters. She serves as Chair of the Board of UN Women Finland. She has previously been a Board Member and Vice Chair of UNICEF Finland (2014-2020). She also holds other board memberships and she is an experienced chairperson.

Closing remarks



**ZELIHA ÜNALDI**

Head of Office a.i, UN Women Türkiye Office,  
Participant in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

Zeliha Ünalı is a strong believer in women's solidarity and activism, and the power of collective action to drive transformative change, multilateralism and the power of grassroots. With a background in International Relations, she has dedicated her career to working with and for women—in academia, in the field both humanitarian and development response, in public institutions, and within the UN system—always striving to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

After completing her master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies at Middle East Technical University (METU), Ünalı spent six years in academia, leading numerous research and advocacy projects on gender equality, development, and delivered courses on women in development.

She later held key practitioner and managerial roles in diverse sectors—from rural development to women's entrepreneurship—working with public institutions, civil society organizations, and international donors including the World Bank, the European Union, and the United Nations. She managed major EU-funded technical assistance projects supporting women and women-led NGOs across 30 priority provinces in Türkiye.

In recognition of her impact in the field, she received the "Çetin Ceviz" (Tough Nut) award as "Best Project Manager" from the Turkish Project Management Professionals Institute in 2015.

In 2014, Ünalı joined the United Nations Türkiye team as a Gender Equality Specialist in the Resident Coordinator's Office. Since 2018, she has been serving as Deputy Country Director at UN Women Türkiye Office, leading flagship programs in ending violence against women and girls, promoting women's participation in decision-making, advancing gender-responsive refugee support, and transforming gender stereotypes. She currently serves as Head of Office a.i. for UN Women Türkiye.

Zeliha Ünalı is one of the 30,000 women who attended the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and believes in the power of solidarity for "equality for all".