

UNI World Women's Conference, 14th June, Liverpool 2018

Opening ceremony

President Ann Selin

Dear sisters (and brothers)

I am extremely pleased to be here with you today. It is wonderful to see so many strong, powerful women from all over the world gathered in one place to discuss the future of work for women. We are very much intent on "Making it Happen"!

Women make up half of the world's population.

UNI represents 10 million women – 10 million! This means that we represent half of the members of UNI's affiliated unions in all sectors and regions.

We fight against all forms of discrimination – both in general and in the workplace – and we are dedicated to improving the lives and working conditions of workers everywhere.

It is not chance that has brought us here today. Each of us has a story to tell. Each of us has fought battles no man will ever have to. We can and should be proud of all the things we have accomplished.

I've been asked to share my own story. I left school just before my 16th birthday and started looking for a job. Something to do while I made up my mind what to study. I didn't have a clue!

I'm from a working-class family. My father worked all his life for the City of Helsinki as a car mechanic and later a supervisor. My mother worked part-time in a food factory when I was young, went full-time as I grew up, and later worked in a launderette.

Both my parents were trade unionists. So when an opening arose in the Commercial Workers Union for a messenger or errand girl, I went for it – and at the age of 15, I got the job. As a workplace, the union was perfect for me. I was really lucky to find something that was so in line with my own values. At that time, unions were growing rapidly in Finland, and needed more staff. It gave me the chance to take on all sorts of new challenges.

I soon became active in my own local union branch, as well as in local politics, joining the Labour Party at the age of 17.

Over the years I did almost every job there was to do in the union. I was elected shop steward at the age of 19. I lived and breathed unions and labour issues.

Many different opportunities came along – and I never said no. I had the chance to play a major role in Maj-Len Remahl's 1986 campaign to become the union's first female president. And we won! She went on to become the first president of UNI Global, and served from the very beginning in 2000 to the first statutory congress in 2002.

As time went by, she gave me more responsibility. First, she appointed me as her PA, and I later became the union's first full-time youth secretary. I held many different positions and worked in the regions for 10 years. During that time, an increasing number of members encouraged me to run for president after Maj-Len.

At first, I laughed it off, thinking that it wasn't for me. They weren't serious, surely. They were just being polite. Little Ann from the suburbs of Helsinki, president? Give us a break! But I eventually realised that I ought to give the idea some serious thought.

Then, in 2002, I ran. All three candidates for president were women! It was a close-run race, and a major turning point in my life. I've been so fortunate and privileged to have had the opportunity to serve my members and Finnish society as a whole, as well as the international community. I'm also very grateful for all the support I've received over the years. I hope I've managed to support others and will do my best to do so in the future, too. Sisters, we need to support each other!

I've just announced that I will not seek re-election when my union, PAM, holds its congress next June. By that time, I will have been president for 16-and-a-half years. I will not be retiring, but it is time for a change. I will also be stepping down as president of UNI Global Union after this congress, but will continue to work with the organisation in other ways.

Today, I stand here in Liverpool, it is the centenary of women's suffrage in the UK. It is therefore fitting that we recommit to working together to break the divisive barriers created by the inequalities that remain rife in our world. We will discuss enormously important topics such as violence against women, gender balance, the future of work and the Mentoring Programme.

I want to highlight the Mentoring Programme, and I hope you all take the time to look into it if you haven't already done so. Since its launch in 2013, it has proven to be an effective way to involve more women, particularly young women, in trade union work. The aim is to nurture a strong, new generation capable of influencing the working conditions of women in the service sector all over the world. I encourage everyone to get involved. The Equal Opportunities Department will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have. The Mentoring Programme is really working, and I expect that it will receive enthusiastic support throughout our organisation.

The 19th-century author, feminist, journalist and social activist Minna Canth is very famous in Finland for her unflinching and incisive statements. She once said that women's issues should be incorporated into all aspects of life, because: "The female question isn't only a question of women, but of humankind." I agree, and expect that you do, too.

Thank you!