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Helvi Sipilä (1915-2009)

First female Assistant Secretary-General of the UN was instrumental in furthering women's rights

The Finnish lawyer, diplomat and politician **Helvi Sipilä** died in Helsinki on Friday at the age of 94.

Sipilä was appointed Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations in 1972, becoming the first-ever woman to reach such a position.

She held the post until the end of the decade, taking charge of the UN's Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs.


Sipilä organised the first World Conference on Women in 1975 and she was instrumental in the establishment of the United Nations' Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 1976, originally as the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985.

There were in fact in Helvi Sipilä's career so many "firsts" for a woman that it is hard to know where to begin.

Before going into the UN, Sipilä had headed her own legal office for some decades, once again being a pathfinder in this branch.

From this platform she was elected in 1968 to head the international women's organisation Zonta International, breaking the stranglehold on the Presidency hitherto held by candidates from the United States and Canada.



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In 1982, Sipilä, who had never held much truck with political parties of any colour, nevertheless agreed to stand as the Liberals' candidate in the Finnish Presidential Elections, because "they were so liberal as to ask me".

The Finnish voters were not yet ready to elect a female President, but the later examples of **Elisabeth Rehn**, narrowly beaten in 1994 by Martti Ahtisaari, and the current incumbent President **Tarja Halonen** indicated that it was only a matter of time before they were.

Helvi Sipilä received numerous national and international awards including twelve honorary doctorates, and she was granted the honorary title of Minister in 2001.

Born Helvi Linnea Aleksandra Maukola on May 5th 1915, she was married to **Sauli Sipilä** for 62 years until his death in 2001, and they had four children.

We published a lengthy article on **Helvi Sipilä's** life and work on the occasion of her 85th birthday in 2000, and further details of her career can be found there.

Previously in HS International Edition:

▶ [Helvi Sipilä at 85 - a strong-willed woman marks the way \(5.5.2000\)](#)

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