ADDRESS BY H.E. MS. PANDULENI SHINGENGE, AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA TO FINLAND AT THE SEMINAR ON 135 YEARS OF COMPANIONSHIP BETWEEN FINLAND AND NAMIBIA, 11 TO 13 OCTOBER 2005.

Mrs. Eeva Ahtisaari
Minister Nangolo Mbumba,
Mr. Seppo Kalliokoski
Your Excellencies,
Brothers and Sisters and
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is wonderful to be here, to be back in the country that I call home and where all Namibians are made to feel so much at home!

Thank you Mrs. Ahtisaari, Mr. Kalliokoski and the Finnish Namibia Friendship Association for the excellent arrangements made for this seminar.

Let me also use this opportunity to thank the people of Finland for their warm welcome - in the best tradition of Nordic hospitality.

This seminar is very important, for a number of reasons. First it is the celebration of wonderful 135 years of companionship between our two countries. Second, this is a unique opportunity to take stock of advances made in our relationship and especially of advances made in gender equality. I have been asked to speak on the Role of Women and Development. As I was preparing for this assignment, I found out that it is very difficult to speak on the role of women in development in isolation to the cluster of issues that have a direct impact on this issue.

I therefore thought that it is important to talk about the impact of globalisation, the ravages of war, the struggle of living with HIV/AIDS or the marginalization of women. All these issues are important in this regard and are not only a matter of concern to women. They are a matter of concern to everyone, since the involvement of women is essential to the economic development of a country.

The debate regarding gender in general and the role of women specifically has been around and seems not to be going away. Since the 1960s, especially after the impact of the civil rights movement in America, which started in the mid fifties, what was referred to as the feminist movement has been about a search for better clarity and understanding of the relationship between sons and

daughters of the same families and the same nations. It is therefore important to restate the mater differently by starting from the perspective that the debate is not the same as the one about colonialism or apartheid in the part of the world where I come from.

In Africa, women always assumed prominence in the lives of their communities. In Africa the mother in most communities was the disciplinarian, the head of family affairs, even though on the surface, it would appear that she was as oppressed and repressed as her counterparts in other parts of the world.

The fact, to be simplistic, that African languages do not distinguish between HE and SHE is by no means a coincidence, but an affirmation that gender discrimination that leads to conflict was not part of the African make-up. In my view, it is the colonial experience that had undermined the African patterns of authority and relationship to the extent that the role of the African woman was further eroded and compromised. In fact, history shows that even in the hardest days of colonial and white oppression in South Africa and Namibia, for example, the women whose husbands were taken either to war or thrown into prisons, had to maintain the household with only their strength and tenacity to count on. I make this point to make the suggestion that it is time that people in Africa, and women in particular, need to turn to their own history in order to find a more appropriate grounding to tackle the many socio-economic and political challenges confronting us in terms of gender roles. In other words, the women in Africa have always had a presence, subtle though it might be, in the lives of their male leaders.

In the last decade, the world has seen more deliberate efforts to rectify the existing imbalances in the gender roles. With Beijing over a decade ago, and now Beijing Plus 10, there is a greater awareness that to change gender roles in the work place and in the political cultures of nations, would require more deliberate efforts, and that such efforts should be monitored by nations and communities themselves.

Towards this end, there is a clear understanding for this purpose. Equally, we have the necessary framework in place and I believe that there is a political will as well. Moreover, women are in the forefront in support of these objectives.

Since the political will is there, and the women are there, what is required now is constant actions not only by men, but by women, to check ourselves how fast or far we have gone, and take stock of what is needed. In the context of the 21st Century Africa, there are deliberate efforts to begin the gender mainstreaming in the political make-ups of our

nations and political systems. For instance, any national conference convened by the Namibian Government since independence in 1990 would have a governmental stipulation that all delegations be at least one third women. And the men never raise objection so far, at least not publicly.

The NEPAD document and the AU literature highlight the importance of women in playing leading roles in shaping the development agenda of the continent. This is certainly a refreshing approach from our experience of the past.

Some governments in Africa have gone as far as having women Deputy Presidents (Zimbabwe and South Africa) and in the case of Namibia, we have a Deputy Prime Minister.

The populations did not seem to have major objections to these recent appointments. In fact it is to the contrary-the men seem to be rather intrigued and pleasantly surprised.

What is very necessary now in Africa is a collective approach to how we shape decisions concerning the future by recognizing both sexes because no society needs only one side of the equation. In fact ignoring or putting women aside in issues of national importance is like not allowing half the world to play their part in solving these problems. The result of this approach can only mean that the world will be saved from unnecessary counter-productive practises.

For me, the real challenge for Africa is that of making sure that we integrate gender issues through political, socio-economic in order to bring about justice and fairness in our overall planning processes.

This will certainly help to fully prepare my young daughter and my young son to face the future with confidence. In this way, we will avoid unnecessary conflicts which do come about as a result of ignorance. Differences in terms of physical make up of people should not be used as an excuse for maintaining inequality and injustice.

For me, man and woman should continue to be valued and appreciated for what they are; their life should be treasured on equal footing.

Maybe the conflict is not in gender, but in the matter in which, we were brought up as boys and girls, and that is very different from our biological differences. This is where the major challenge lies for Africa, namely,

how we remain men and women yet compliment each other for the sake of our nations and our already troubled world.

The reforms needed in our national cultures and the systems they produce must be spearheaded in the education systems that the youth of the new world is subjected to. We need to encourage policy makers around the globe to embark upon education systems that will socialize new citizens to appreciate that the fact that some of us are born female and the others male should not become the new terrain of struggle, but a terrain of learning to compliment one another for the benefit of humanity. As part of the same human family that needs the two sexes for reproductive purposes, it is equally important that these two sexes develop new paradigms of communication and exchange of skills and competencies to create a better world for all.

My President, Hifikepunye Pohamba has already expressed a keen interest to demand that gender mainstreaming be taken more seriously than before. This is, in part, in recognition of the demographic realities in Namibia, and I argue for many other countries where the women constitute the majority in the population. Therefore the girl child is not to be looked at like before, but to be invested in more deliberately in a way that will grant the girl child her appropriate place and role in the community.

All this is good, but not enough, and we must strive to do better. Objectives must be clear and this is where the Commonwealth Plan of Action, NEPAD plan of action, AU resolutions and the Millennium Development Goals can make a difference. These instruments are not just plans; they are a template for action. It is therefore important as we deal with issues related to women and development that we ask ourselves about the following:

- Will it help to open doors of learning for girls throughout the developing world?

- Will it help more women to secure property rights to protect their families and to obtain bank loans to develop their businesses?

- Will it provide assistance to women, families and communities to prevent violence at home?

- Will it change the lives of women living with HIV/AIDS and how will it protect others from getting infected?

- How, in other words, will it give women more choices, more power, more control over their lives and the future of their families and communities?

Let these challenges not be dominated by process, by bureaucratic inertia or endless arguments on procedures. The call must be clear and what ever we do, we must motivate, we must deliver and we must achieve results:

- We must strive for girls and boys equally and they must go to school and stay there for the necessary duration;

- We must achieve equality for women and men in everything they do, including choosing jobs on the basis of competence and qualifications;

- We must achieve that women and men must get paid the same for doing the same work.

- We must achieve that laws must provide women and men with equal protection from exploitation and violence.

- We must achieve that women and men's particular health-needs must be met; and

- We must achieve that a woman must be able to be elected to the position of the President of any country.

Lastly, all of us need to begin to speak about the roles of women more openly in such that we do not sound as though we are saying that we only want women in top positions, and everything is settled. History suggests that people who are oppressed at one time or the other, are prone to become oppressive once they have power. It is not just the important positions that need to be filled by women. What is needed is that those who occupy positions of power, and policymaking, needs different understanding of their positions, and whether that what they do in those positions have a profound impact on ordinary people's lives. Whether they are male or female, they are accountable to those who have entrusted them with the sacred positions of influence and power. It might just be that women, in the main, are more sensitive to those who are weak and vulnerable in society than men. In that case, let women take over and improve the world now; and substantive equality is one of the most important principles that should guide us if we are to achieve desirable results!

I thank you for listening.