

## **The Dignity of Woman throughout the Ages**

There are two different aspects to consider when we are discussing the topic “The Dignity of Woman”. The internal aspect is to find our dignity within ourselves. The external aspect is the process of loss and again finding our dignity through history and into the future. In this lecture we will be concentrating on the external aspect.

### **From Goddess to Sinner**

History is viewed from a clearly andocentric perspective<sup>1</sup>. If one leafs through commonly available history books one finds that they are strangely almost exclusively referring to the exploits of men. Women are generally depicted as intriguers, troublemakers and power hungry rulers.

Both in the fields of research and archaeology, where the beginnings of mankind have been investigated, Palaeolithic art was interpreted as a masculine hunting scene. Only now has it been discovered that the “weapons” are depictions of plants and that feminine symbols take a central position. The masculine symbols group together in the peripheral positions, which shows that women took an honourable and significant role. Wall paintings and archaeological findings from Siberia through to Central Europe indicate that they are based on a concept of a higher female being. According to Riane Eisler (author), the ideology which was prevalent through into the Neolithic Period and beyond was gynocentric<sup>2</sup>, in which woman stood at the centre represented by a deity in a female form. Thus, there was no basis for male dominance over women or the general superiority of “masculine” compared to “feminine” values.

Various times in history, in various cultures, the exaltation of femininity through female gods has been recorded. Women were respected by the Germanic peoples as priestesses and healers. The Egyptians considered Isis as God’s mother. The Pharaohs considered themselves to be sons of Isis. In Hindu mythology Aditi (in Sanskrit: the Unlimited One) is the personification of the unending, the mother of the gods in Heaven, who supports Heaven, maintains every existence and

---

<sup>1</sup> Androcentrism is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing male human beings or the masculine point of view at the center of one's view of the world and its culture and history. The related adjective is androcentric

<sup>2</sup> Gynocentrism is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing female human beings or the feminine point of view at the center of one's view of the world and its culture and history. Gynocentrism is similar to androcentrism, with the focus on the male replaced with a focus on the female

nourishes the earth. In Tibetan Buddhism Tara is one of the main deities. As an intermediary for All-Love, one also called her “Mother of all Buddhas”. Magna Mater, the great mother, was a Roman goddess, introduced in Rome in 204 BC.

In Syria and Palestine Ascherat (Ishtar) was honoured as the Queen of Heaven. As the female founder of the Japanese imperial family, Amaterasu is seen as « the goddess who shines illustriously in the heavens ». There are many other female deities; Aphrodite, Ceres, Venus and Demeter.

The decline of the gynocentric society began with the wave of invasions of Indo-European pastoral tribes who brought with them their gods of war. The core of their system was that the power to take life was considered to higher than the power life gave. Power was considered to be synonymous with conquer and destroy. The original meaning of power as the live-giving and nourishing force was forgotten.

These destructive waves of conquering folk also brought with them cultural impoverishment. Goddesses who were spouses of the powerful war gods were murdered or debased through rape. In this way women had their decision-making power and spiritual authority taken away from them. In the antique world, the beauty of a woman was demonised as dangerous and seductive for men. Greek philosophers claimed that men were human beings in the fullest sense and women some deficient being, the result of spoilt sperm. For Aristotle women only served as the medium through which to produce children.

Around the beginning of the Common Era a movement began, inspired by the teachings of Jesus Christ, which brought with it the beginnings of equal rights for women. He shocked the religious authorities with his announcement that Jews and Greeks, menials and free persons, men and women are all spiritually equal. In early Christianity women held high management positions. Gatherings often took place in the houses of its female followers. However, Jesus’ insight that our spiritual evolution would lead, through a new values system which includes female values, to fundamental change in our society could not be accepted by the authorities of the day and still cannot be accepted today.

Dr. Christa Mulak’s comment to this is: “One point which is much more important, I think, than that Jesus was a man is his demonstrable esteem for that which is feminine. This attitude can be seen as equally exemplary both for a woman and for a man. Just as it is only man and woman together who create mankind; divine beings can only arise from the polar unity of male and female characteristics. Such a notion of God has not yet been developed by theology ... a point of neglect.....“

After Christ, the great church father Augustine adopted the inheritance of Neo-Platonism whereby for him man stands over woman like the soul over the body, the higher over the lower.

Thomas of Aquinas adopted the views of Aristotle and many of the then church fathers followed this same way of thinking. There was even discussion that woman must resurrect as a man to be saved. They imagined a Heaven without women or at least that women would be below men in the hierarchy.

Based on both theological interpretations of the creation story (according to scientific insights Genesis 1 was written much later than Genesis 2 and 3) the one which stated that woman was created out of a man's rib became the main principle of thought. According to this man was even seen as the origin of man. Tertullian (200 years after Christ) accused women of being responsible for sin and temptation and that mankind would die because of them. It went as far as to make woman responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

During the dark centuries of the inquisition the Hammer of Witches or "Malleus maleficarum", from 1487 degraded women into imperfect animals. Sexual lustfulness was only identified with women.

Even as late as 1910 Max Funke, a German philosopher, wrote a book in which he wished to prove that women are not human beings.

Fortunately there were in history also men who defended the dignity and rights of women. In the Middle Ages an outstanding champion of the rights of women was Friedrich von Spee. He fought against the eradication of witches at the risk of his life.

### **So what have women themselves done to protect their value and their dignity?**

In the Christian field there is very clearly a history of feminine theology traditions from the female disciples of Jesus over deaconesses and woman preachers in the original Christian congregations through to the female mystics of the Middle Ages. The Venetian theologian and author Christine de Pizan (1405) wrote in "Book from the City of Women" about this female history of theology which has been so persistently hushed up. She said the works of women are ladders which lead to Heaven.

There have always been great women in history who were a source of hope for others, who pointed out the way to a dignified life and lived it as an example. I wish to thank all of them. It would take too long here to mention them all. I would like to just highlight some examples.

This applies to Margarete Porete, who at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century called men in the church to have more humility before God. She was stoned to death in 1310 as a heretic and is not yet rehabilitated to this day. One woman who has been highly regarded to this day is the mystic, Hildegard von Bingen.

The nun Roswitha von Gandersheim in the Middle Ages proved to be a playwright; Wilhelmine von Böhmen became a religious leader; and Jeanne D'Arc, a soldier, showing that women were not inferior in occupations which were defined as male. Queens in the Middle Ages such as Mathilde von Scotland (the wife of Henry I of England) and Philippa von Hainault (the wife of Edward III of England) even had a major and very positive political influence.

In the Renaissance period there were equally powerful women such as Diana from Potiers, Margarete from Navarra, Katharina from Medici and Elisabeth I of England.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century some women like the Swedish Queen Christina and poets such as Countess La Fayette and Aphra Behn showed themselves to be scholars and authors.

Important contributions to the restoration of the dignity of woman, her value and place in society were achieved by the Women's Movement. One of its masterminds was the English author Mary Wollstonecraft. In her book "Defence of Women's Rights" (1792) she assured us: "Woman was not just created to comfort man.... Based on this misunderstanding concerning the differences between the genders a fully false system was created which robbed our gender of our dignity." She therefore demanded comprehensive education of all women in equal rights so that they could free themselves from sexual suppression. It is true that Mary Wollstonecraft was famous, or perhaps one should say infamous during her life, because of her book, but was forgotten at once after her early death. Following generations involved themselves above all with the great feminist manifesto of John Stuart Mill "The Bondage of Woman" (1869). This sharp-witted essay by one of the most prominent English thinkers had immense influence on the Women's Movement. Mill wrote it after the death of his wife who gave him the impulse to write it and should therefore actually be considered to be his co-author.

### **The first wave of the modern Women's Movement**

The first wave of the modern Women's Movement or Women's Rights Movement (middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) fought for the basic political and civil rights of women such as the right for women to vote which was only established in Germany in November

1918, the right to have gainful employment and the right to receive an education. In order to make it clear what difficulty was experienced to get these demands accepted, one must know that even in the 1887 in the USA Senator George C. Vest wrote that one should not debase women by giving them the right to vote. "That would take her down from that pedestal where she is today, influencing as a mother the minds of her offspring, influencing by her gentle and kindly caress the action of her husband toward the good and pure."

Two different streams of thought developed in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. One made it the goal to achieve self-determination and free development of the personality. The other was based on clichés about feminine virtues and woman as the good spirit in the house. The latter gave rise to religious feminism which later developed into victim feminism.

The emancipating demands for equality of women as they developed in France and England only gained ground in Germany somewhat later at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The discussion concerning a newly to be defined role of woman initially took place in literary circles. Notable people involved included Karoline Schlegel-Schelling (1763-1809), Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833) and Bettina von Arnim (1785 –1859).

The first International Women's Day took place simultaneously on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1911 in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. A resolution was passed at all demonstrations which should apply the required pressure to get introduction of the vote for women in Germany.

The International Women's Day in 1914 was a demonstrative commitment for peace.

The first wave of the Women's Movement in the USA came about in the wake of the Anti-Slavery Movement. There were many, often religiously motivated, women amongst the "Abolitionists". They recognised that it was not only the civil rights of the Afro-Americans but also those of women which did not match those of white men. Thus in 1848 the "Seneca Falls Declaration" was passed which oriented itself consciously on the US-American Declaration of Independence and which, above all, demanded the right to vote for women and reform of marriage and ownership rights.

At the end of the Second World War it was the women in Europe who initially had to replace the men who had been captured or who had fallen, were sick or unable to work. She was often the head of the household who had to feed the family. The problems of this particular situation led rapidly after the end of the war to founding of the first women's associations. (1945 the "Berlin Council of Women").

## **The second wave of the Women's Movement**

The second wave of the Women's Movement (since the 1960s), which created a theoretical concept about feminism, went beyond the goal of achieving 'equality' of man and women on the political, social levels and both occupational and private levels. Inspired by the political climate of the 1960's it was no longer simply a matter of participating in institutions dominated by men but rather to generally call them into question, particularly because of their hierarchical character. Thus at least part of the second phase understood itself as an autonomous women's movement. This second wave was part of the new social movements.

In an appeal to the West German Women's Freedom Movement in December 1956, it was stated that peace is a special task for women. "We are conscious of the fact that woman, who is destined by her nature to care for, guard and protect, has a duty to perform in public life which no-one can take from her".

The triggers for the second wave of the Women's Movement were a general social upheaval and the change in values in the 60's. Its roots already existed however in the 40's in France. In Germany it became a social movement in the wake of the student movement. In the USA, women inspired by the citizen's movement of the Afro-Americans and the mass movement against the Vietnam war, engaged themselves again more strongly for their own social equality.

The special characteristics of this women's movement were:

- 1) Spectacular types of actions taken oriented on the forms of protest of other social movements
- 2) "Consciousness Raising", through seminars, including: *Raising consciousness* on the repression of women who already are conditioned to the role they should play in society, from birth. The fact that they were socially disadvantaged was often unnoticed.
- 3) An analysis of the repression and creation of a theoretical framework which became known as "The Feminist Theory".

The critical contest of the new feminist movement from the USA was taken on in Germany, whereby the Betty Friedan books which had the greatest influence on the federal German women's movement. The author Betty Friedan, nee Betty Naomi Goldstein, became the most famous feminist in America. She founded the "National Organization of Women" (NOW) in the 60's and

led it as the president. The original mother of the women's movement which started around 1967, the "Women's Liberation Movement" ("Women's Lib"), in the USA was not a radical feminist but just one who appealed for a social partnership between man and woman.

At the beginning of the 70's, the Federal Republic of Germany created women's centres, women's forums, and women's migrant forums in almost all large cities where the isolation of women in the family and occupation is decamped and a need for women-specific awareness of the self and self-confidence existed. Attempts were made in self-awareness groups organised according to the example of the American women's movement to also help women on a concrete basis to escape from their isolation and free themselves from the ideology that they are inferior.

The effect of the second wave of the Women's Movement began to fade away, in the middle of the 70's. The feminist theory diversified, giving women the opportunity to use the altered consciousness for themselves and actively penetrate into institutions in order to work there and push equality in society forward.

### **The third wave of the Women's Movement**

A third wave of the Women's Movement began to appear in the 90's, especially in the USA, which continued on the ideas of the second wave in a modified form. New aspects were, a more global, less Eurocentric perception: stressing the necessity for men to also reconsider collectively their self-image, as both genders are restricted by their role image. Thus a chance for true equality would be available. The generation change! Feminism had a bad reputation amongst the young generation and was considered as home made, and "uncool". On the other hand many young women do not see equality of the genders being realised at all. The young feminists of the third wave are less spectacular, but they are target-oriented in projects and networks with a feminine orientation, e.g. in the Third Wave Foundation (USA).

Feminism has developed since its inception in many different directions. Depending on their environment, culture and economic situation women have developed various concepts, and set different emphases.

There were also many misunderstandings about the basic ideas behind feminism. Feminism is in no way to be seen, as meaning the devaluation of men, even if there have been individual representatives of it who have expressed such ideas.

There are basically two opposing forms of feminism, the strait-laced, moral, and self denying feminism and the freethinking, buoyant and self-aware feminism.

Naomi Wolf wrote in her book "The Strength of Women", that she does not consider it to be so meaningful to place the powerlessness and victimhood of woman in the foreground, thus accusing the male sex at the same time of imperiousness and aggressiveness. "No-one is served well by such thinking. I would like to set this direction of feminism against power feminism. Its basis is tolerance and respect for feminine individuality and sees itself as feminism of optimism and strength."

Spiritual freedom and the same right to an education are passionately advocated goals in power feminism.

### **What is our situation today?**

Globally, the Women's Movement has experienced many successes. Just think about the right to vote, the right to an education, equality and right to gainful employment. We can see that there are women overall in the world today in responsible positions, even as heads of state.

A new concept is that of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming means that for all social projects, the different living situations, and interests of women and men should be regularly taken into consideration from the outset, as there is no gender-neutral reality. The term gender mainstreaming ("integration of the equality perspective", "consistent equality orientation") designates the attempt to achieve equality of the genders on all social levels. The term was first used in 1995 at the 4<sup>th</sup> UN Women's Conference in Peking. Gender mainstreaming particularly became known because the 1997 Amsterdam Contract made the concept an official goal of EU politics. Gender mainstreaming differs from explicit women's politics in that all genders are included equally in the concept design. The goal of gender mainstreaming is recognised by broad expanses of the political spectrum.

However, we have not arrived at our final goal yet otherwise this conference would be unnecessary. In connection with our topic "The Dignity of Woman", it is important to tap into where we can connect to, and on what we can build.

The starting thesis which Gloria Steinem took for her book "Revolution from Within" was : the first step an individual takes in the direction of wholeness is self-respect and self-determination. If a woman has achieved determination within herself, the next step must be to use the power of this self-determination to claim back another, socially

important and complex, right that is serious and potentially dangerous - the right to take the reins of power and to exercise them, not just for herself but also to change the environment and put her mark on the map.“

This means that we find ourselves at a point where our inner development stands in direct connection with our influence on society. In other words, as soon as we have discovered the dignity within us, we live it, we carry it out to the world and begin to invest ourselves in society with our individual and different capabilities and interests.

To be correctly understood means living our dignity with self-confidence. Self-confidence is in turn not only trust in our own selves, but also to trust in our ability to contribute to changing the world. Discovering and living out of our dignity for the women in our society, are the prerequisite for any advancement.

The great degree to which we are influenced by the images of women from the past and are still inhibited can be recognised, if we look at the image of women in so-called victim feminism: connected with the ideal of being the good spirit in the house is uncomplaining self-sacrifice, unconditional fulfilment of the strict standards of respect, checking the behaviour of other women, the belief that a woman is asexual and male sexuality is bestial, the conviction that seeking after riches and fame will corrupt mankind, the idea that all aggressive impulses from women must be nipped in the bud, that a woman must always take the role of the peacemaker if there are disputes, and the conviction that feminine nature is fundamentally different and morally better than masculine nature.

Living out our dignity also includes readiness to allow ourselves to be drawn into these areas, also when they do not appeal to us yet or cause us to be fearful. For me personally, it is the area of money and power. The misuse of money in our world tends to give me the desire to avoid money and just to accept it as a necessary evil. If I were to change this attitude then I could find joy in the creativity of working with money. To allow money to flow, and to use it for the projects which are important to me, brings me satisfaction. This includes consciousness in connection with our dignity, that we are entitled to earn money and to decide what we want to do with it.

It is exactly the same with power. In our heads power has become a commanding and destructive force. We equate it with suppression and exploitation. Since power has become alienated from its original meaning of being a life-giving and nourishing force, we women have also lost the connection to it. Together with our dignity we can give back to power its original meaning if we

accept it, and use it for changing our world to have a Culture of Peace.

Many women are finding, quite independently of their financial situation or relationships, access to a commodity which is becoming ever more valuable: to information. We see information being swapped like stamps in the economic world for strengthening groups of companies. Do you know the saying “Knowledge is power“? We should not forget to continue to educate ourselves and to specialise in our areas of interest if we wish to participate on creating peace.

Further areas are advertising and media. We get angry about sexist advertising, pornographic poses and depictions and feel abused. Women today still appear to feel themselves at the mercy of this, without any defence. However, I would claim that advertising and the media are actually dominated by us women. Why? Over 85% of all consumer tasks are performed by women. This is why the advertising branch is dependent upon a good opinion from women. If a woman protests in a reader's letter to a newspaper about sexualised advertising, her letter will be seen, as if it represents the opinion of 1,000 or even 10,000 women readers. Thus the point here is that we live our dignity and give it expression.

We women here in Europe must take the opportunity, in every way, to actively participate in forming our society and take the place which we wish to take.

We are fortunate to live here in a culture where we can be conscious of this, very easily, and we can be thankful for that. There are still many women throughout the world who have no chance to recognise their value and to find their own identity. What is needed there is good education of both genders in order to come to recognise the joy of an equal relationship/ partnership and to learn to live it.

May I quote the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola:

“What a ultra-large and admirable happiness there is for man who is allowed to have what he wants and to be whatever he chooses to be.“

Let us discover what we want! Our female forebears have paved the way for us. We have the opportunity to awaken and develop the capabilities which have been invested in us.