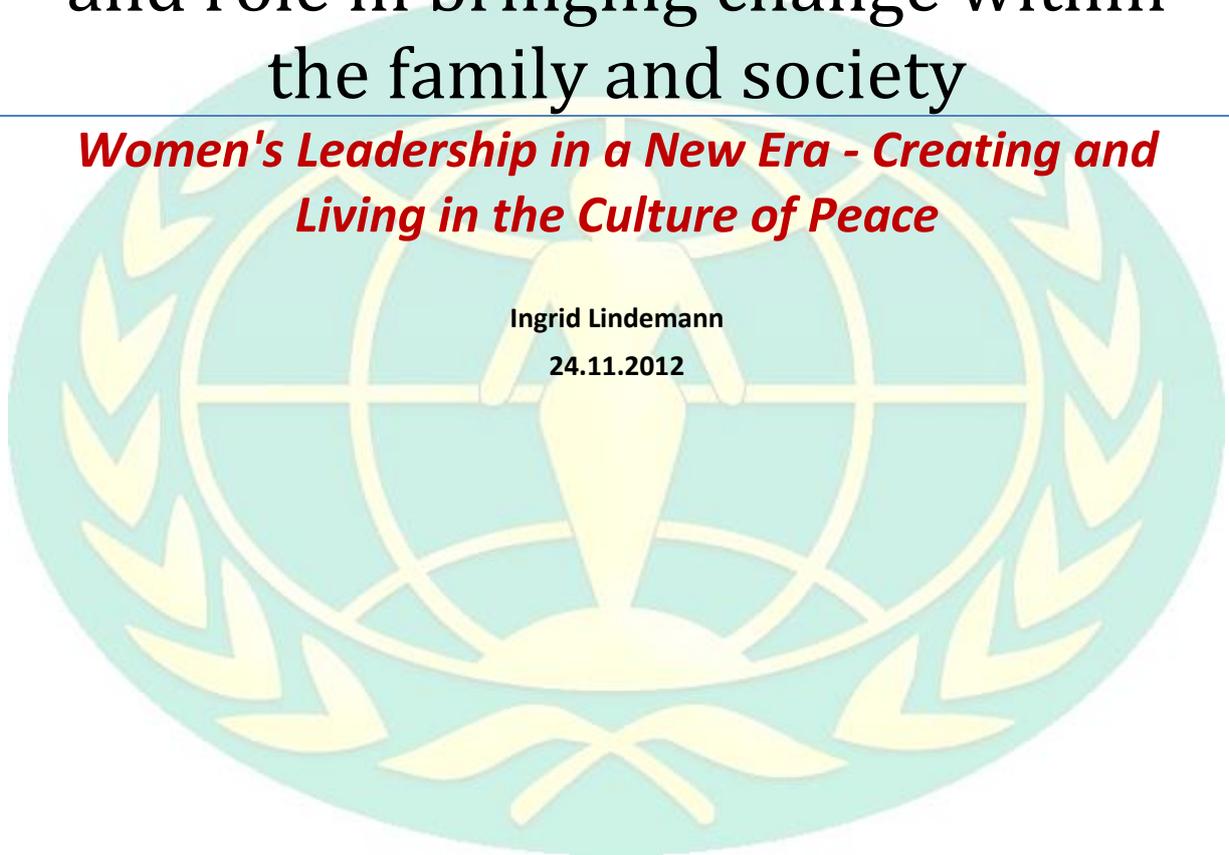


Discovering women's value, dignity and role in bringing change within the family and society

***Women's Leadership in a New Era - Creating and
Living in the Culture of Peace***

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Session I

Discovering women's value, dignity and role in bringing change within the family and society

Dear Mrs. President, dear guests and ladies from all over Europe

I am delighted to greet you this morning in this wonderful historical city of Rome. We have come here from so many different European countries!

We are here in Europe's native city. In Rome, On November 4th 1950 (November fourth, nineteen fifty) the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms took place and a treaty was drafted.

Then, on the twenty fifth of March 1957 (nineteen hundred and fifty seven), six countries assembled on Capitoline Hill in the '*Palazzo dei Conservatori*', and founded the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. This was the Treaty of Rome, the precursor to the European Union. Today twenty seven countries belong to the EU, and a further five countries are waiting to be accepted. The founding countries were Italy, France, Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands. The post-war politicians were very inspired by a spirit of reconciliation and longed to live in a war-free Europe. This free, democratic Europe in which we live today is for me a miracle when one looks at the bloody, war-torn history of Europe.

I am very grateful for this consolidated Europe without borders, where we are able to live in freedom and peace together. I think that 'Lady Europe' deserves a round of applause!

Why did I say "Lady Europe"? In the Greek language "Europe" is a combination of "far, broad" and "view", basically meaning: The woman with the far reaching vision". Having a far reaching vision means envisioning and investing in a future beyond existing political, cultural, religious or financial borders.

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To me this is more than merely the translation or definition of a name but is the task that Europe has. As "Europe" is feminine, we as women need to be more aware of the importance of our participation in the process of creating Europe.

I firmly believe in the necessity of the input of femininity into our society. It is my desire to create awareness of the capabilities we as women have. Also I believe that exactly these capabilities will make the difference in every aspect of our society, be it political, economic or other.

We have come together motivated by a common desire for a peace which encompasses Europe and the whole world. Through the many faceted aspects of their work, women in Europe have pioneered a wonderful path to that peace, but have however often not been recognized or valued by society. Especially after the war women rebuilt their homes and cities. Many men had died, had been wounded or were being kept as prisoners. Women did an incredible job. Who really knows how many NGOs have been inspired and led by women? Who really knows the struggles of the women who represent European women in the European Parliament?

However, even today the input of femininity in all parts of society is not easy or to be taken for granted. Therefore on March 5th 2010 the "Women's charter", a declaration adopted by the European Commission on the occasion of the 2010 International Women's Day, stated in the preamble: *"Economic and social cohesion, sustainable growth and competitiveness, and tackling the demographic challenge depend on real equality between women and men."*

Recognizing that although achievements have been made, they are not yet sufficient to grant real equality, Article 4 stresses the importance of dignity, integrity and the elimination of gender – based violence.

"The full enjoyment of fundamental rights by women and girls is an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights and is essential for the advancement of women and girls, peace, security and development. Gender-based violence, including harmful customary or traditional practices, constitutes a violation of fundamental rights, in particular human dignity."

The philosopher Immanuel Kant spoke of the universal dignity within each human being. He said: *'Each person honours the dignity of humanity in his or her own person, has the right to receive respect from others, for the same dignity ; and is in turn, obliged to respect the human dignity in those around him...'*

Dignity therefore, is within us from the very beginning of life. Dignity is of inborn nature, an innate characteristic of humans, independent from any other characteristics such as age, intelligence, ability or gender.

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It is inspiring to hear and read all these statements and they are of great support. However, what does dignity mean to me, to us as women? How does this dignity manifest within us? How can we find a way of relating to our dignity? What does dignity mean in our daily life? How is our role in bringing change in our families and our society enhanced by dignity?

We need to think about and discover our unique and precious personality. No matter how the various religions or ideologies have considered women up to now, no matter what our teachers have told us, no matter what the life of our mothers and grandmothers has been like, no matter what the role models were, we need to engage in a paradigm shift, to renew the image of womanhood in ourselves. Mahatma Gandhi said: "If you want to change the world you have to be the change you want to see in the world."

Let us be aware that as well as woman's role also man's role has changed. Also men need to review the traditional image of manhood. Creating this new anthropology of woman-and manhood will be the crucial alliance for the culture of peace.

Now is the time to learn to cherish ourselves, to realise that we possess special values, capabilities and talents which our society so desperately needs. The world today is seeking for feminine values and this is seen even in politics, where more and more women are elected or appointed to represent their people.

Becoming aware of our specific feminine qualities will strengthen our self-respect and understanding, that without us women, as well as the feminine qualities which men possess, there can be no peace and no further development in society and the world. As soon as we deeply engraft these wonderful abilities to our consciousness, we will find our dignity.

Dignity also has another aspect, the aspect of living and acting in dignity. We can find this idea of the ethical autonomy of people in the Enlightenment and also in the philosophy of Kant. Envisioning the future of Europe therefore includes respecting and protecting human dignity as well as living our dignity.

However, living our dignity is more than granting dignity to one another, to all mankind.

Living our dignity also includes preventing the nonobservance of human dignity in our society.

During the last few months, articles and comments on Europe have been basically centered on the financial crisis. Countries like Spain, Italy and Greece have been evaluated only according to their financial status, their debts, and their money-saving decisions. I don't want to start a discussion on European finances. I want us to remind ourselves of the need to respect and protect the dignity of our fellow Europeans.

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Some of the comments I read were really disrespectful and I wonder how our Italian, Greek and Spanish friends must have felt.

Living dignity is accepting each other and recognizing the differences in culture, tradition, religion and character as enriching.

Living our dignity means overcoming and healing the wounds of past conflicts. WFPW Europe has celebrated Women's Friendship meetings crossing the Bridge of Peace with women from former enemy countries. These "Bridge of Peace ceremonies" are a foundation for more understanding and appreciation of each other beyond all borders by sharing thoughts, feelings, experiences and finding common interests and solutions to problems in our respective communities.

Living our dignity is giving a new role model to our young people and changing the educational emphasis to living dignity. In July 1997 Nobel Prize winners from all over the world signed a declaration. They wrote:

"The future of the world hangs on our willingness to really change. --We must dare to tell young people, even in history classes, that they will contribute more to the world by living in dignity than by dying heroically, that it is conscience, rather than obedience, which is the basis of human life. The only real challenge remaining today, the real issue which will define the future, is, for the first time, to live together by respecting ourselves, each other and the environment."

The respect of human dignity is a way of life:

- Living our dignity is meeting one another at eye –level.
- Living our dignity is looking at each other through the eyes of dignity.
- Living our dignity is meeting one another in our common origin, meeting as children of the one God, beyond all religious differences.
- The eyes of dignity do not judge
When we meet respecting our dignity we do not expect the other to be or act as we want, because we can enjoy the variety of all character types.
- Living our dignity is sharing without expecting, giving without asking
- Respecting our dignity is trusting each other
- Dignity includes empathy
Living our dignity is living love.

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In his discourse on "Grace and Dignity" (1793) Friedrich Schiller says: "Dignity has various degrees, approaching grace and beauty, it is called noble and it will be called sovereign.the highest degree of dignity is Majesty."

Only by living dignity can we generate changes in the role model of women and bring changes into families, politics, economics and all aspects of our life. Dignity is the first cornerstone for a united Europe. This is stated in the first Article of the European Charter which says: "Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected. "

Europe is young and is pioneering an exemplary way for countries to unite based on common values and a resolve to share a peaceful future. This has been recognized by the Nobel Peace Prize 2012 which was awarded to the European Union (EU) which (quote) "*for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe*".

We, women living in Europe, united in the effort to contribute to the establishment of a culture of peace, want to continue this path, despite all external difficulties, envisioning a Europe living and giving dignity to all in all aspects of our life.

