

PES Women, Annual Conference,
Women, culture and religion and Europe
Copenhagen 24th May 2006
Opening statement

By Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Party Leader

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to welcome you all to this conference. I'm very happy to do this for the obvious reason that I strongly believe that women's issues are still highly relevant, not only for women but also for children and men who would also ultimately gain from more equal rights.

But I am also happy to be here because I think the specific idea behind this conference – that women's issues are in danger of becoming pawns in other cultural conflicts – is a concern that deserves much thought and discussion.

Of course, it is by no means a new thing that women's appearances and roles in society are controlled and shaped as symbols of a whole society or culture. For example, we saw women's clothing habits change dramatically in Iran when the Islamic revolution was pushed through by Khomeini.

That's why making cultures, norms and traditions more conducive to women's freedoms has long been a concern of ours and of the women's movement in general. Classical debates about equal pay, voting rights, access to childcare and other socio-economic questions have always, to some extent, been accompanied by questions of how culture, norms and roles repress or liberate women.

The clear message from social democracy must always be that we oppose cultures and norms that rob women of their basic freedoms.

Just as we have a proud history of opposing discriminating laws and unjust economic structures we must oppose cultures and norms that because of the restrictions they put on women, prevent women from deciding over their own bodies, getting access to contraception and abortion, from getting the educations they dream of, from wearing the clothes they wish to wear, and from marrying the person of their choice – from living their lives as women. Those things have always been against our basic social democratic ideals of freedom, equality and solidarity.

However, I think it is safe to say, as the conference poster suggests, that women's lives, women's choices, women's values and positions in society have recently been *exploited* as a way of justifying one culture and as a vehicle for attacking another. The role of women has been politicized in a new way, in other words, and it is very important that we try to get a hold of that situation.

Surely, you might say, it is positive that women's issues are being raised in new ways?

Of course it is. I think the role of women and the politicization of 'the feminine' is still a relevant question in all cultures and in all societies – though some societies are obviously more unequal than others, some roles are more oppressive than others.

But the problem on the table today, as far as I can see is not that women's issues are being raised in a loud and clear way. The problem arises precisely when women's issues are abused as pawns in other conflicts, motivated, fundamentally, by other concerns that have little – if anything – to do with women's rights.

My hope for this conference is that it might help to identify strategies whereby we as a movement become able to maintain a clear voice in favour of the universal rights that all women should have, while at the same time maintaining a clear distinction between women's rights and other conflicts that ought to be judged on their own merits.

And heaven knows that the campaign for women's rights contains enough material on its own. For instance, 'home' – supposedly the safe-haven and the private sphere – home continues to be the most dangerous place for women across Europe.

Gender specific violence affects hundreds of thousands of women every day in Europe. Last year almost 2000 women in Denmark sought refuge from domestic violence. On average a woman in this country is murdered every fortnight, mostly by her present or former partner. Such patterns repeat themselves throughout Europe.

We see organised exploitation and trafficking of women for prostitution on a scale perhaps never previously seen, with revenues from such trade approaching the enormous sums generated by illegal trade in drugs or weapons. This is systematic exploitation of women, going on right under our noses.

More subtly, women across our continent are suffering discrimination and harassment at work and are the first to be pushed out of the labour market when jobs are cut. They suffer unemployment, underemployment, the persistent gender pay gap and, as a consequence, a third age in which they will live longer on a much smaller pension than their male counterparts.

So my message today is to welcome you here, to welcome a new discussion of classical women's issues and to welcome a specific discussion of the cultural dimension of women's rights today - a dimension which is becoming more prominent and more problematic in Europe today.

I hope the principles of equality and justice can be given new meanings in this new politicized environment.

And I hope that this conference and the deliberations of the three panels will prove illuminating and that they might provoke similar discussions nationally in Europe in the come in months and years.

Thank you for your attention today, I hope you enjoy the conference.