

Celebrating the Diversity of Our Unity: Democracy, Gender, and Dignity in a Global Perspective

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and read by Evelin Lindner at the 2nd International Conference on Democracy as Idea and Practice, Oslo, Norway, Workshop 5, Democracy, Gender and Dignity in a Global Perspective, January 13-14, 2011, www.demokrati.uio.no/arrangementer/konferanser/2011/2nd-Democracy-as-idea-and-practice-jan-2011

Abstract

Valuing diversity begins with the equal valuing of the two basic halves of humanity—women and men. Ranking male over female is a template for equating difference with dominating or being dominated. Violence in gender, parent-child, and other intimate relations has to be recognized as a "school" for using violence to impose one's will on others. This is underpinned by cross-cultural data.

There is a need for new social categories and for a discourse about human dignity and human rights in the context of a partnership or domination system.

Some of the initiatives Riane Eisler and her colleagues are working on at The Center for Partnership Studies (www.partnershipway.org) are being presented.

To change social systems so democracy and human dignity are realities, particular attention must be paid to the social construction of gender and parent-child relations. The reason, simply put, is that it is in these primary human relations – the relations without which none of us would be here – that people first learn to respect the rights and dignity of others, or to accept violence, cruelty, oppression, and discrimination as “just the way things are.”

Yet none of our old social categories (rightist or leftist, religious or secular, capitalist or socialist, Eastern or Western, and so forth) connect the dots between our intimate relations and our national and international relations. This is why in reporting the findings from my research I had to coin new terms to describe two contrasting social configurations that keep repeating themselves historically and cross culturally – configurations in which gender issues are key. I called one configuration the *domination system* and the other the *partnership system*.

One of my key findings is that neither real democracy nor truly valuing human dignity is possible in societies that orient primarily to a domination system: societies characterized by authoritarianism in *both* the family and the state or tribe, the rigid ranking of the male half of

humanity over the female half, and a high degree of socially condoned and even idealized social violence.

Historic and cross-cultural data shows that cultures or subcultures where people are taught men should dominate women are also cultures where in-group vs. out-group thinking – and with this, discrimination based on race, religion, and other differences – is considered acceptable and even moral. It should not surprise us that where the most fundamental difference in our species – between female and male – is equated with superiority or inferiority, dominating or being dominated, being served or serving, children early learn a basic model for also viewing members of other out-groups, such as different races or religions, the same way.

Despotic and violent cultures implicitly recognize this – even though many people who think of themselves as progressives still fail to do so. For example, for the despotic and violent Nazis, a major goal was “returning women to their traditional place.” We see the same priority of subordinating women in religious “fundamentalist” cultures or subcultures – be they Eastern or Western, Muslim or Christian – that would reimpose theocratic despotism and “holy wars.”

All these are cultures where not only women but anything considered “soft” or “feminine” – be it in a woman or a man – is devalued. So caring, caregiving, and nonviolence are relegated to the same inferior status as women. This is why, if we are serious about more caring cultures, we must make raising the status of women and ending traditions of violence against women and children a top priority.

Domination and violence in intimate relations kills and maims more people every year than wars. In many parts of Southeast Asia little girls are given less healthcare and food than boys. Genital mutilations of girls and women are still condoned by custom and religion in parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as are so-called honor killings. International surveys show that a huge proportion of women have been physically abused by an intimate partner. Rape is still endemic. Yet all this violence is still relegated to the ghetto of “gender issues.”

We must redefine democracy and human dignity to include both halves of humanity and both the so-called public and private spheres. Then we can finally move past the tired old debates about right vs. left, Eastern vs. Western, socialist vs. capitalist, and so forth, and create what in my most recent book, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, I call a caring economics. And only then can we seriously talk about democracy and human dignity.

Riane Eisler is internationally known for her bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade*, now in 23 foreign editions and her newest book, *The Real Wealth of Nations* – hailed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as “a template for the better world we have been so urgently seeking.” Her other books include *Sacred Pleasure*, *The Power of Partnership*, and *Tomorrow’s Children*. Dr. Eisler is president of the Center for Partnership Studies, www.partnershipway.org. She keynotes conferences worldwide, with venues including invitations by Rita Suessmuth, President of the German Parliament, and Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic. She has received many honors, including honorary Ph.D. degrees, the Alice Paul ERA Education Award, and the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation’s 2009 Distinguished Peace Leadership Award, and is in the award-winning book *Great Peacemakers* as one of 20 leaders for world peace, along with Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King. She can be contacted at center@partnershipway.org.

