

Revisioning the Economic Rules: Empowering Women and Changing the World

Riane Eisler's speech at the World's Women Forum in Barcelona, Spain on July 29, 2004 describes why "women's issues" must be at the front of the social agenda to build a sustainable, equitable, and peaceful future. A statistical study of data from 89 nations shows that raising women's status is key to a better quality of life for all; as women's status rises, so does fiscal support for the stereotypical "women's work" of caring for children, the elderly, and people's health (whether done by women or men)--work essential for the "high quality capital" needed for the postindustrial/knowledge economy.

It is a pleasure and an honor being here with you today – with so many women and men dedicated to creating a better future by empowering women worldwide – a cause I have been passionately committed to for over three decades, as a scholar, author, and activist.

We are all aware that women must become economically empowered. We need equal access to education, well-paying jobs, credit; we need to change laws and customs that discriminate against us simply because we were born female. But – and this is what I want to focus on in the short time we have together today – we need more than that. If we are to change the shameful fact that worldwide the mass of the poor and the poorest of the poor are women and their children, we not only need a bigger share of the present economic pie. To use a women's metaphor, we have to bake a new economic pie.

So I want to invite you to join me in something we hear a great deal about: in thinking outside the box of conventional economic systems, whether capitalist or socialist, and begin to envision and help create a new economic system – economic measurements, models, and rules that no longer are conceived without taking into account the female half of humanity; indeed, without taking into account the humanity of either men or women; an economic system that takes into full account the real value of the most basic and important human work: the work of caregiving – of caring for children, the sick, the elderly – work without which there would be no workforce, work without which none of us would be alive – work that has traditionally been relegated to women, and is still considered inappropriate for so-called "real men," work that must be taken into full account if we are to stop being on the periphery, if we are to become truly economically empowered.

And I am going to propose to you that this is doable: economic systems are human creations, the move into the postindustrial economy offers a window of opportunity to re-examine and re-define what is and what is not productive work; and we women must take leadership in this not only for ourselves as women, but for the sake of us all – women, men, and children.

About Me

I am going to start by telling you a little about myself and my work, because as we used to say in the 1960s when I first became involved in the women's movement, the personal is political. Change begins with changes in personal consciousness, which then become the basis for group action. I can attest to this from my own life.

For much of my early life, and even after I was trained in both social science and law, I had no consciousness of something many of us are today acutely aware of: that we have all been brought up to devalue women and the stereotypically feminine. It was not until the late 1960s when, along with

thousands of other women in the United States, I awoke as if from a long drugged sleep, that I became aware that problems that I had thought were just my personal problems were actually social problems – problems stemming from the systematic subordination and devaluation of women.

When I became conscious of this, I jumped into the women's movement. I started the first center in the U.S. on women and the law, testified at hearings to change property laws, drafted new laws, worked to change want ads that were then segregated by sex, with all the good jobs under help wanted men and all the dead-end helper jobs under women. I taught the first classes at UCLA in what was later to become Women's Studies: classes on the legal and social status of women. And of course I worked for the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. constitution, wrote a mass market book on it – and then was appalled when it was defeated, this simple amendment that just said that equality under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the federal or state governments on the basis of sex.

Now, that defeat, which mobilized for the first time the rightist-fundamentalist alliance that is so powerful today in the United States – a regressive alliance that came together over an issue that most progressives to this day still categorize as “just a women's issue” – marked the beginning of a major regression. It marked a retreat from progressive political and social policies and the beginning of a strong backlash against women's rights – a backlash that continues to this day, with many of the gains we made during the 1970s reversed or in danger of being reversed, for example reproductive freedom, without which we cannot realistically speak of freedom for women.

So it became evident to me that to achieve real and lasting progress, we have to go deeper than changing laws – laws are important, but they can be repealed with the stroke of a pen. We have to change the culture. We have to change the larger system of beliefs and the key social institutions – from the family, education, and religion to politics and economics. So I returned to my original training as a social scientist, particularly as a systems scientist, and embarked on the multidisciplinary, cross-cultural, historical research for which I am known today – research reported in books such as *The Chalice and The Blade* [1] (which is I am happy to say now in 20 languages, including Spanish, under the title *El Caliz y la Espana* [2]), research that shows that empowering women – personally, socially, and economically – is not only essential for women, but for us all – for women, men, and children, for creating a more equitable, prosperous, peaceful, and sustainable way of life.

It shows that how a society structures the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity is not, as we are often told “just a women's issue” – that is, a secondary issue to get to after the so-called “more important” issues have been addressed; it directly affects every social institution – it affects the family (whether it is democratic or authoritarian), education, religion; it affects politics and economics – and it directly affects the governing system of guiding values.

Empowering Women and Building A More Just and Caring World

Specifically, cultures where women have higher status and more political and economic power are also cultures where social and economic policies give more support to traits and activities such as caregiving, nonviolence, empathy – traits stereotypically considered feminine. And I want to emphasize that when I say stereotypically, I mean just that. This is not something inherent in women or men. Some men are caring and nonviolent. Some women are cruel and violent. We are talking about gender stereotypes we inherited from earlier times when society was based on more rigid rankings of domination – beginning with the ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half – a domination system that has caused, and continues to cause, enormous suffering.

Making leaders and the public at large aware of this fact – that what is good for women is good for the world – is one of the most important and useful strategies for moving forward for us – for moving so-called women’s issues to where they belong: from the back to the front of the social and political agenda. And we have empirical evidence that this is so. A statistical study using data from 89 nations my colleagues and I did for the Center for Partnership Studies, the organization I direct, compared measures of the status of women with quality of life measures, such as infant mortality, human rights ratings, and percentage of the population with access to health care. We found that the status of women can actually be a better predictor of quality of life than Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the conventional measure of a nation’s economic development.[3] For example, Kuwait and France, had identical GDPs, but infant mortality, one of the most basic measures of quality of life, was twice as high in Kuwait, even though GDP was the same. Similarly, the GDP of Finland and Singapore were almost identical. But maternal mortality rate in Singapore, in which the status of women was much lower than in Finland, was more than double that of Finland, a society where, as in other Nordic nations, women have made strong gains.

Raising the Status of Women – and Changing the World

Nordic nations such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway are particularly interesting in connection with what happens as women make strong gains. In a very short time during the 20th century these nations changed from poor, famine-ridden countries to prosperous, creative economies.[4] Why? Because their policies give value and fiscal support to the stereotypically feminine work of caregiving. Consider that measures such as universal healthcare, childcare allowances, elder care, and paid parental leave helped produce the higher quality human capital that transformed them into highly prosperous nations. These nations also always rank on the top of the U.N Human Development Reports. Even beyond that, Finland was second only to the much wealthier United States in the 2003 World Competitiveness ratings. And of course women in the Nordic nations occupy a far higher percentage of political leadership positions than anywhere else in the world: they are between 30 and 40 percent of the legislatures.

And as I said, as the status of women rises, the value system changes. These nations also pioneered the first peace studies courses, they pioneered laws against physical punishment of children in families, in other words, nonviolence, empathy; they pioneered a strong men’s movement to disentangle male identity from violence, and they also pioneered what we today call industrial democracy; team work in factories rather than turning human beings into mere cogs in the industrial machine.

None of this is random or coincidental. It is part of a cultural configuration characteristic of what I call the partnership rather than domination model: a configuration in which the higher status of women is central. Because what happens is that as the status of women rises, so also does the status of traits and activities stereotypically associated with the feminine: soft rather than hard values, empathy, caring, nonviolence – and men then find it more possible to embrace these values without feeling threatened in their status.

What We Can Do

So what can we do to use this information?

First, we need to raise consciousness of leaders and the public at large that the traditional male-superior, female-inferior model of relations is an obstacle to a more generally prosperous, equitable, and peaceful world. It is a mental map children learn early on for equating difference, beginning with the basic difference between woman and man, with inferiority and superiority, with dominating or being

dominated— a mental map that can then be applied on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, or any other difference.

Ironically, this is something that those trying to push us back recognize. Be it Hitler in Germany, Khomeini in Iran, the Taliban, or the Rightist-fundamentalist alliance in the United States, recognize, these people give top priority to “getting women back into their traditional place – which is of course a code word for a subordinate place. We must persuade more progressive leaders to also recognize this. And the study I just told you about, *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life*, is a good tool for this. And of course what this study shows is what we are here looking at: that economics cannot be understood, or effectively changed, without attention to other core cultural components – and that a central cultural component is this construction of the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity.

Now this is urgent, because as long as women are devalued, so also are those traits and activities stereotypically associated with women – caregiving, nonviolence, empathy – the very traits and activities we urgently need for a better future, indeed, in our age of nuclear and biological weapons, if we are to have a future at all.

Second, we need a systemic approach. For example, if we are serious about empowering women, we must change entrenched traditions of violence against women and children worldwide. This too is an issue I am deeply committed to through the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence coordinated by the Center for Partnership Studies – an alliance that brings a strong, and until now shamefully missing, moral voice to this pivotal issue – an issue that is foundational to ending war and terrorism, as it is by witnessing or suffering intimate violence that children are first trained for using force as a way to impose their will when they grow up.

Third, we also need to think systemically about economics. And as I said, this means thinking outside the box of the old economic models, whether capitalist or socialist, and develop new economic rules that give visibility and value to the stereotypically feminine work of caregiving.

We are appalled that the first thing that gets cut is funding for health, education, welfare – in other words, funding to care for people. The Structural Adjustment Policies of the International Monetary Fund even demanded this, with disastrous human and economic results for debtor nations. But notice that while we are told we don’t have enough money for this, there always is enough money for weapons, wars, and prisons – for controlling, hurting, and killing people, rather than for nurturing, empowering, and yes, caring for people.

This is directly related to the systemic devaluation of women and the work of caregiving. This devaluation has shaped the economic models and rules. And indeed as long as these rules and models are in place, we women will remain on the periphery. Already women are in the U.S. quitting high paying corporate jobs because of the double burden of women, of the difficulty, indeed almost impossibility, of balancing jobs with caregiving responsibilities at home. The media then tell us women should return to their “natural” place in a male-headed family. But returning to a dependent and subordinate place is not the answer. The answer is what we are discussing here: developing rules, models, and measures that give visibility and value to the activities that nurture and support life – whether performed by women or men. A first step toward this new partnership economics is changing how we measure productivity. Today GDP counts activities that take life and destroy our natural habitat – coal burning and cleaning the environmental damage it causes; selling cigarettes and the medical costs and funeral costs of the health damage they cause. These are on the positive side of GDP. But not only do these measures put negatives on the positive side: they do not include the unpaid caregiving work primarily performed by women in the

“informal” economy, be it in their homes, or in their communities as volunteers – even though these services contribute most to everyone’s social well being.

And of course what is not counted is not considered in making economic policy. We have to change this! Consider that not only are caring activities in the informal economy not counted in GDP but that in the formal economy, in the labor market, professions that involve caring – such as childcare, primary school teaching, professions until now largely composed of women – are paid significantly less than those that do not involve caregiving – such as plumbing and engineering. So in the United States, people think nothing of paying plumbers, the people to whom we entrust our pipes, \$50 to \$60 per hour, but childcare workers, the people to whom we entrust our children, only \$10 or 15 an hour – and that’s already considered a high rate. And we demand that plumbers have some training but not that all childcare workers have training. Now none of this is logical – it is actually pathological. We must change it.

Economic Inventions that Recognize the Value of Caregiving Work

We can change it. Because just about everything involved in our economic life is a human creation. It’s an invention — from stock exchanges and sweatshops to banks and social security. We already have a few economic inventions that give monetary value to caring and caregiving. Parental leave for both mothers and fathers, specially paid parental leave, flexible work options. But we need many more. Companies that provide paid parental leave can be supported by public policy through matching local, state, and federal grants. Companies that provide employees with childcare and/or parenting classes can be given tax rebates. These are all sound investments in our future.

Indeed, they are investments in a successful postindustrial/information economy – an economy in which high quality human capital is the most important capital. This economy requires people able to learn, relate, work in teams, solve problems flexibly and creatively. And this high quality human capital is not just produced in universities or through job-training.

Findings from psychology, and more recently neurobiology, show that the quality of human capital is, to a much greater extent than has been recognized, shaped by the quality of childcare and early childhood education.

So, yes, the shift into the postindustrial era offers us a window of opportunity to revalue what is and is not productive work. Consider, for example, that it is deemed natural to have government-funded training to teach soldiers to kill, and to provide publicly-funded pensions for soldiers. But government-funded training and pensions for those who perform the work of caring for children is still a rarity – even though high-quality caregiving is essential for children’s welfare and development, even though without it there would be no labor force.

So the issue when it comes to what society supports is not one of money; it is one of social and economic priorities– of what is or is not really valued.

We must change these priorities – and we can change them by taking leadership. There is much more I would like to share with you, but we are short of time and I hope we can continue this conversation in dialogue. Also, I should say you can get more information about all this from the Center for Partnership Studies website, www.partnershipway.org.

I want to close by focusing again on six levers, six interventions, for fundamental systemic change:

1. Demonstrate the social and economic benefits of policies that support caregiving, and their urgent necessity in the postindustrial age.
2. Employ a systemic approach, including a concerted campaign to end violence against women.
3. Envision and create a partnership economics that no longer devalues women and stereotypically feminine traits and activities, such as caregiving, nonviolence, and empathy.
4. Change economic measurements such as GDP to include the work of caregiving stereotypically relegated to women
5. Develop, support, and disseminate partnership economic inventions such as paid parental leave that give visibility and value to caregiving – whether it is performed by men or women.
6. Expand women’s role in policy making and form alliances to work together with one another, as well as with men – locally, nationally, and internationally – to bring women’s issues to where they belong: from the back to the front of the political and economic agenda.

This is a time of enormous opportunity. We women have an unprecedented, historic opportunity to take leadership in forging new economic models, rules, and practices. We must do this for ourselves, so we can have better lives, so we are no longer on the periphery, so we have economic models, rules, and measures that don’t put us at such a disadvantage, that don’t put caring men at such a disadvantage. We certainly must do this to end the shameful fact that women and children are the mass of the poor and hungry worldwide – and this is the only way to really change this. We must do it to build solid foundations for the more sustainable and humane future we so want for all of us – for ourselves, for our male partners and colleagues, and above all for our children and for generations still to come. Indeed, when I come to a conference like this, with so many wonderful women, and men who understand that real partnership between women and men is key to a better world, I know that we can, and we will, succeed.

NOTES

[1] Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 19987.

[2] Riane Eisler, *El Caliz y la Espada*, Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuatro Vientos, 1990.

[3] Riane Eisler, David Loye, and Kari Norgaard, *Women, Men, and The Global Quality of Life* (Pacific Grove, CA: Center for Partnership Studies, 1995). The nine measures we used to assess the degree of gender equity were: the number of literate females for every 100 literate males; female life expectancy as a percentage of male life expectancy; the number of women for every 100 men in parliaments and other governing bodies; the number of females in secondary education for every 100 males; maternal mortality; contraceptive prevalence; access to abortion; and based on measures used by the Population Crisis Committee (now Population Action International), social equality for women and economic equality for women. The thirteen measures used to assess quality of life, were: overall life expectancy; human rights ratings; access to health care; access to clean water; literacy; infant mortality; number of refugees fleeing the country; the percentage of daily caloric requirements consumed; Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of wealth; the percentage of GNP distributed to the poorest 40 percent of households; the ratio of GDP going to the wealthiest versus the poorest 20 percent of the population; and as measures of environmental sensitivity, the percentage of forest habitat remaining, and compliance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. When we explored the relation between the gender equity and quality of life variables with descriptive, correlational, factor, and multiple regression analyses, we found a strong systemic correlation between these two measures. These findings were consistent with our hypothesis that increased equity for women is central to a higher quality of life for a country as a whole, and that gender inequity contracts the opportunities and capabilities, not only of women, but of the entire population. The link between gender equity and quality of life was confirmed at a very high level of statistical significance for correlational analysis. 61 correlations at the .001 level with 18 additional correlations at the .05 level were found, for a total of 79 significant correlations in the predicted direction. This link was further confirmed by factor analysis. High factor loadings for gender equity and quality of life variables accounted for 87.8 percent of the variance. Regression analysis, also yielded significant results. An R-square of .84, with statistical significance at the .0001 level, provided support for the hypothesis that gender equity is a strong indicator of the quality of life.

[4] Hilikka Pietila, “Nordic Welfare Society –A Strategy to Eradicate Poverty and Build Up Equality: Finland as a Case Study,” *Journal Cooperation South*, Number two, 2/2001, pages 79-96.