

What's Good for Women is Good for the World SEQ CHAPTER 1:1
Foundations for a Caring Economy
Riane Eisler Address at the U.S. State Department
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It is a great pleasure being here on this occasion of Women's History Month, with such a distinguished group of women and men, and I want to thank the Executive Women at State and the Office of Civil Rights for inviting me, and to give special thanks to Ruth Hall, Rebecca Webb, Cynthia Saboe, and all the others who worked with so much care on this event.

I have to say it is a particular pleasure for me, because when I first became involved in the women's movement a little over a generation ago, a meeting sponsored by Executive Women at the State Department would have been impossible: there were hardly any such women, and we didn't yet even have Women's History Month – although I do have to say that it seems a bit strange to only have one month dedicated to half of humanity, rather than our history being fully integrated into what children of both genders are taught all year..

So even though we have clearly made progress, we still have a very long way to go. And this is all too evident if we consider the horrific violence against women that is in many places unprosecuted; that women and girls are still in many regions denied education, health care, access to property, even freedom to leave their homes on their own so they basically live under house arrest. And even here, we are barely hanging on to hard-won gains such as reproductive rights; even access to contraception is now under attack; and women are still a small minority in government and business leadership.

Yet these matters that so impact women's lives, and all too often deaths, are still generally viewed as “just women's issues” – a patently ridiculous term, considering we are half of humanity, actually the majority. However, that's how most policy-makers still think – that's how marginalized we still are.

For instance, there is much talk in United Nations meetings about poverty. But how often do we hear that poverty so disproportionately impacts women worldwide; that according to UNIFEM, 70 percent of those living in absolute poverty (that is starvation or near starvation) are female? How often do we hear that in these United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, women over the age of 65 are almost twice as likely to be poor as men of the same age? And this is not only because of employment discrimination, but because most of these women are or were either or part time caregivers – and poverty is their reward for this essential work.

So it is up to us to change the political discourse – and policies – so that these so-called women's issues are no longer marginalized.

And I am going to propose to you that this is essential not only for the sake of women

and girls, but for us all, because – and this is one of the central findings from my research as well as increasingly from the research of others – as the title of my talk signals, what’s good for women is good for the world, and what’s bad for women is bad for the world.

And right away I can give you some empirical evidence:

We did a statistical study at the *Center of Partnership Studies* based on two bundles of statistical data from 89 nations. One bundle consisted of measures of a nation’s general quality of life, all the way from infant mortality rates and access to potable water to human rights and environmental ratings. The second bundle consisted of measures of the status of women from these 89 nations. And what we found is that in significant respects the status of women can be a better predictor of general quality of life than GDP.

Now that was a pioneering study we did in time for the UN Women’s conference in Beijing in 1995. Since then, these findings have been verified by other studies, including the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Reports, which show that nations with the lowest gender gaps – and unfortunately there are no nations with no gender gaps, yet –are regularly in the highest ranks of the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Reports. So not only does the status of women correlate strongly with general quality of life but also with national economic success.

I will get back to this, especially in the second part of my talk, which as my subtitle signals, is Foundations for a Caring Economy.

But first, I thought I should tell you a little about myself and my research.

Because there was a time when I had no inkling of these systemic connections between the status of women and a society’s values and institutions. In fact, it was not until the late 1960s that I woke up as if from a long drugged sleep to realize – along with 1000s of other women – that many problems I thought were just personal were actually social problems I shared with all these other women.

So I threw myself into the women’s liberation movement. And because my training is not only as a social and systems scientist, but as an attorney, I founded the first Center on Women and the Law in United States. And at that time, people would look at me blankly and say, what does that mean, women and the law? Well, what it meant is that as late as 1969 I had to write a Friend of Court Brief to the U.S. Supreme Court, making the then radical argument that women should be considered persons under the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment.

Eventually we *were* able to use the 14th Amendment to strike down blatantly discriminatory laws and practices. For example, at that time the want ads were still segregated into help wanted male and help wanted female, with all the dead end jobs under help wanted female.

But after a while we saw that we had to do more than change laws. That became clear

with the Equal Rights Amendment – and by the way, I wrote the only mass paperback on the ERA, *The Equal Rights Handbook*. When that amendment, which simply said that the federal government and state governments may not discriminate on the basis of sex, did not pass, it became clear that the problem goes much deeper, that it is a cultural problem

So I embarked on the multidisciplinary, cross-cultural, historical study of cultures for which I am known.

And one of the main findings from this research is directly related to what we are here talking about – which is that as long as women are devalued so also will anything stereotypically associated with women and the “soft” or feminine, such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence be devalued.

In other words, the status of women is inextricably interconnected with a society’s system of values as well as with the construction of every social institution – from the family (whether it’s more democratic or authoritarian) to education, religion, politics, and economics.

Let me briefly illustrate: If we look at some of the most regressive, repressive, violent regimes and would be regimes of modern times, we see that for them – whether for Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Soviet Union, Khomeini’s Iran, the Taliban of Afghanistan, or so-called religious fundamentalists of all stripes – for them a top priority was and still is pushing women back into their “traditional” place – a code word for subservient place – in a “traditional family,” another code phrase for an authoritarian, male-headed, punitive family, where children are taught to equate difference, beginning with the fundamental difference between male and female, with superiority and inferiority, with dominating or being dominated, with being served or serving.

And this model of human relations can, and is, then be generalized to other differences: be it race, religion, sexual orientation -- which is why we see such a strong correlation between rigid male dominance and prejudices against out-groups. But you only see this once you start taking into account how a society structures gender relations. Here I want to put something on the table, which is that, as we all know, many people are uncomfortable talking about gender. So we have to recognize that. But we also have to recognize what the great sociologist Luis Wirth said: that the most important things about a society are those people are uncomfortable talking about. We saw that with race, and it was only as we started to talk about it that things began to change. And that’s equally true of gender – so we have to talk about it much more.

Because consider how ironic it is that those trying to push us back recognize in their gut the connection between the status of women and the kinds of repressive, violent systems they want to impose – and yet for many people who consider themselves progressives, these are “just women’s issues.”

And it’s up to us, to you, to change this. So how do we do this?

Unfortunately it has not been enough to say that the global pandemic of discrimination and violence against women is unjust, that it violates the most basic human rights. In other words, the social justice and human rights argument, while essential, has not been enough.

So we need an additional strategy, which is at the core of my work. This strategy is to show that not only does this devaluation of women have terrible effects on women and girls, but on us all.

This takes me directly to the second part of my talk, focusing on the urgent need to move past the tired old argument of socialism vs. capitalism – because neither is proving capable of meeting our mounting economic, environmental, and social challenges. Of course, we don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater, we want to retain the best elements of both markets and government planning, but we have to go beyond them to a new economics – which is the theme of my most recent book: *The Real Wealth of Nations*.

That book starts with a premise that, once articulated may seem self-evident: that the real wealth of a nation, of the world, is not financial – we certainly saw that with the melting into thin air of all those credit swaps and derivatives; in fact, we see it every day as stock markets seesaw back and forth. A nation's real wealth consists of the contributions of people and nature. So we need what we have not had: economic measurements, policies, and practices that give visibility and real value to most important human work: the work of caring for people, starting in early childhood, and caring for our natural environment. And before I go any further, I want to play you a 3 minute video about the Caring Economy Campaign from our website, showing the urgent need for new measures of economic success, Social Wealth indicators that show the enormous economic value of the so-called women's work of caring and caregiving as foundational not only to ending women's disproportionate poverty but to moving to a more equitable and sustainable and prosperous future for us all.

VIDEO

Well, you have now seen a video about a caring economy -- and isn't it strange how just seeing caring and economy in the same sentence, many people do a double take. But isn't that a terrible comment on the uncaring values we've learned to accept as driving economic systems?

And this is directly connected with a hidden system of gendered values, in which caring, caregiving, the soft, the stereotypically feminine, is systemically devalued – whether in women or men (as in how still today sensitive, caring men are often held in contempt not only by men but by many women). And we see this devaluation in business and economic policy.

Consider how many people, including politicians, have no trouble finding funding for stereotypically “masculine” activities – and of course we're not talking about anything inherent in women or men, we're talking about gender stereotypes. So there is always

money for prisons, as per the old stereotype of the punitive father; for weapons and wars, as per the old stereotype of “real men” as warriors. But when it comes to caring for people, for healthcare, childcare, good nutrition for children, for all that is considered soft or feminine – somehow there is no money.

This is of course inhuman. But, and this is where you come in, it is also economically irrational, indeed, economically suicidal.

Consider, that we are now well into the shift from the industrial to the post-industrial knowledge/service era – a time when economists never tire of telling us that the most important capital is what they like to call “high quality human capital.” Well, that high quality human capital isn’t just produced in universities. We know from neuroscience, not just psychology, that whether we have these flexible, creative, innovative people, who can work in teams and not just take orders from above, who can solve problems – that this heavily hinges on the quality of care and education children receive early on when their very brains are being formed.

So we have a real opportunity to use a purely economic benefit argument and at the same time expose the hidden gendered system of values that has held us back.

Our first step is changing the economic conversation. And the best way to do this is by showing how caring policies and practices pay not only in human terms but in purely financial terms. And again I want to quickly give you two examples:

One is from business. Studies show that companies that regularly appear on the *Working Mothers* and *Fortune 500* lists of the best companies to work for have a substantially higher return to investors. And that makes sense, if people see they and their families are cared for they work very hard to make their company successful.

But it isn’t only that there is a high return for caring policies in business; the same is true for nations. And here I want to give you the example of nations that at the beginning of the 20th century were so poor that there were famines: nations such as Sweden, Norway, Finland. Whole U.S. states like Minnesota were populated by people fleeing from abject poverty there. But today these nations are invariably not only in the highest tiers of the UN Human Development Reports but also of the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Reports.

And a major factor in this was that they instituted caring policies – universal health care, stipends to help families care for children, elder care with dignity, high quality early childhood education, generous paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers.

In short, these nations gave visibility and value to the work of caring and caregiving. And I should add that they are not socialist. They have a very healthy market economy. What they often call themselves is “caring societies.”

But I want to take this connecting of the dots even further and deeper with you for a

moment. Because these caring policies did not spring up in vacuum. They were part of a cultural shift from the configuration of a domination system to the configuration of a partnership system – and, yes, these are new social categories that transcend conventional ones such as capitalism vs. socialism, right vs. left, religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western, and so forth. And one of the key components of the partnership configuration, as contrasted to domination systems where we see the rigid ranking of male over female, is that in societies that orient to the partnership side of the continuum (and it's always a matter of degree) we see a higher status for women.

That's what we see in these Scandinavian, Nordic societies. They are not ideal societies. But they have low poverty rates, low crime rates, and a generally high quality of life for all. And in these societies there is also a much more equal partnership between women and men in *both* the family and the state. So women are approximately 40 percent of the national legislatures.

And here we come to a very important point. It was not only that women as a bloc voted for more caring policies, as women as a bloc rather than as individuals tend to do (because some women do not vote that way); it is that as the status of women rises, men no longer feel so threatened in their status, in their “masculinity” to also embrace more stereotypically feminine values and priorities such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence.

This is integral to these nations' orientation to the partnership configuration; and so is also that they are in the forefront of leaving behind traditions of violence that are our heritage from more domination-oriented times: the first peace studies came from these nations, so did the first legislation that it's against the law to use physical discipline against children, and they have a strong men's movement to disentangle “masculinity” from its association with domination and violence.

So yes, we have to start thinking in systemic terms, and reframe the economic and political dialogue in ways that take gender issues into full account.

And a very important part of reframing the economic conversation, as you saw in the video I played for you, is changing how economic health is measured.

This is why our Caring Economy campaign is working on Social Wealth economic indicators – more accurate and inclusive measures of economic health – which are essential as the basis for more sound, and caring, economic policies that take into account the enormous economic contributions of the “women's work” of caring and caregiving in both the market and non-market sectors.

Now some people will say, how can you quantify the work of caring for people in households? Well, not only can you do it but it is being done. There are already Satellite reports that value this work at between 30 to 50 percent of the reported GDP – 30 percent is from a U.S. report; 40 percent is from a Swiss one, and 50 percent is from a recent Australian report.

But you would never know this through the conventional economic discourse. This is why the Center for Partnership Studies just held a Capitol Hill Briefing yesterday on the Economic Return from Care Work and High Quality Early Childhood education featuring the new report we did with the Urban Institute, **National Indicators and Social Wealth – which you can download at www.caringeconomy.org**.

So this is our challenge: we not only have to continue to work for women's rights and women's empowerment and for the entry of more women into leadership positions from which we have so long been barred; we now have to do something else from which we have long been barred. We have to work together as women leaders with enlightened men to re-examine and reconstruct our economic structures and rules – structures and rules that were developed without taking into account the needs, problems, aspirations, contributions of the female half of humanity, and all too often without taking into account the humanity of either women or men.

And we *can* do this! Economic systems are human creations. They will change as we shift further into the post-industrial age. But they will only change in a caring and effective direction if we join together to make it happen.

So let's take advantage of this historic opportunity. Let's move these "women's issues" that are so vital for women and girls worldwide, and for us all, let's move them from the margins to the center of the political and economic agenda. And then we will have the foundations for that more equitable, sustainable, and caring future we so want and need.

I thank you.