

THE NEW LANGUAGE OF CHANGE

An insidious way we women are marginalized is by the categories we all use to describe social systems: categories such as religious or secular, right or left, capitalist or socialist.

These old categories serve as "weapons of mass distraction." They obscure a critical fact: that the construction of gender roles and relations is central to how we humans think, live, and structure all institutions – from the family, religion, and education to politics and economics.

Unless we shift to new categories that highlight this fact, our national and international policies will not give primacy to raising the status of women. Nor will they effectively address our mounting global problems.

Once categories are created, used, and internalized they affect our view of the world. They become lenses, which include some matters and ignore others. None of the categories (or lenses) we have historically used to define broad-scale human interactions show the foundational importance of the primary human relations: the gender and childhood relations where people first learn what is normal or abnormal, moral or immoral, possible or impossible, valuable or not valuable.

To move forward, we need new lenses that show the connection between what we are taught in these primary relations and how they directly affect our meta-relations, i.e. business practices, the role of government, international relations.

The new social categories of the *partnership system* and the *domination system* highlight these connections. They make it possible to see patterns: configurations that repeat themselves cross-culturally and historically.

Although these new categories (partnership/domination) are more precise in describing social configurations, in some ways they resemble the commonly used ones of matriarchy and patriarchy. But matriarchy and patriarchy have led to a dead end. They re-enforce a domination construct - one of male or father rule, the other of female or mother rule. Moreover, they do not sufficiently highlight how the subordination of women and the "feminine" also has terrible consequences for men, children, and the planet.

Today, just about every political priority is governed by a gender double standard. Anything stereotypically associated with women in domination systems (such as caring, nonviolence, and caregiving) is seen as secondary, "soft," impractical. In reality the opposite is the case.

The partnership system and the domination system are inclusive, holistic, and integrative. They highlight what we today know from both psychology and neuroscience: that the formative human relations that shape how we see the world and live in it are those between women and men and between parents and children.

The critical matter of early childhood relations has not been a key part of the sociological or political discourse about the “good society.” In part, this is because early child care has traditionally been considered “women’s work,” and split off from discourse about what matters in large social systems. Neither is the construction of gender roles and relations considered important in this regard. If it’s discussed at all, it’s generally as “just a women’s issue” -- even though a male-superior/female inferior model of our species is a mental representation that teaches people to equate all differences (racial, religious, ethnic) with dominating or being dominated, serving or being served.

There are two basic ways to structure relations: through partnership or domination. This does not mean that a little child is an equal partner in a family. Nor does it mean there are no hierarchies. But hierarchies in the partnership system are based on mutual respect, caring, and empowerment, rather than fear, coercion, and disempowerment.

Most progressives have focused on politics and economics as conventionally defined. Enormous energy and resources have been invested in trying to dismantle the top of the domination pyramid. But as long as the foundations – the primary human relations -- remain the same, the domination system will continue to rebuild itself in different forms. At our high level of technology, these regressions are increasingly dangerous to our species and our planet.

To move forward, we must make the invisible visible by shifting to the new categories of the partnership system and the domination system. Just as capitalism and socialism became part of the cultural vocabulary and gained specific meanings through use, we can make this happen. This is long term goal. But if we start now and work together, we can achieve it.

Adapted from Riane Eisler, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007)