Here is our challenge: Will we create societies that support an equitable, caring, and sustainable future? Or will we continue to harm, oppress, and kill one another and destroy our natural life-support systems?

Problems like climate change, growing inequality, pandemics, and the drift toward authoritarianism make this challenge urgent. But as Einstein emphasized, we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.

We’ve been taught to think of societies as rightist vs. leftist, religious vs. secular, western vs. eastern, capitalist vs. socialist, and so on. Yet there have been unjust, violent, and destructive societies in every one of these categories. So none of them help us meet our challenge. Not only that, old social categories, as well as most studies of society, marginalize the majority of humanity: women and children. And this continues despite the evidence from both social and biological science that the relationships that largely determine how our brains develop – and hence how we think, feel, and act – are those between parents and children and women and men.

To create better societies, and better lives, we have to start with a seemingly obvious step: looking at the whole social system. This means including the whole of humanity, both female and male, as well as the whole of our institutions and relations – including families, which is where children first learn what is deemed normal or abnormal, moral or immoral, possible or impossible.

When we use this holistic methodology, we see social configurations that recur across times and across cultures: the domination system and the partnership system (Eisler, 1988, 1995, 2007; Eisler & Fry, 2019). Then we can see connections that are otherwise invisible, especially connections between how childhood and gender are socially constructed and whether a society is more peaceful and egalitarian or, alternately, more violent and inequitable.

**Domination systems and partnership systems**

Let’s start with three societies that on the surface look completely different: the traditional Masai of Kenya, the Taliban of Afghanistan, and Nazi Germany. The first is a pre-industrial African society; the second is a religious, agrarian, eastern society; the third is a secular,
technologically advanced, western society. Despite their differences, all share the core configuration of domination systems:

1. Top-down authoritarian rankings in both the family and the state or tribe;
2. Rigid male-domination, and with this, the devaluation of women and anything that in domination systems is considered “soft” or “feminine” such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence;
3. Culturally accepted, even idealized, abuse and violence – from child and wife beating to pogroms, lynching, raids, and aggressive warfare.

Societies that orient to the configuration of partnership systems also transcend conventional categories. They can be tribal, such as the traditional Teduray of the Philippines studied by University of California anthropologist Stuart Schlegel (Montuori & Conti, 1993); agrarian and religious, such as the Minangkabau of Sumatra studied by the University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday (Reeves Sanday, 2002); and highly technologically developed secular societies, such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

The three core elements of the partnership configuration are:

1. More equality and democracy in both the family and the state or tribe;
2. More equal partnership between women and men and a high valuing of qualities stereotypically considered “soft” or “feminine,” such as caring and nonviolence, in women, men, and social/economic policy; and
3. Low levels of abuse and violence, since they are not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination.

Before going further, I want to clear up some common misconceptions (Eisler & Montuori 2001):

First is the belief that all would be well if people would just cooperate rather than compete. Actually, people also cooperate in domination systems: monopolies, terrorists, and invading armies cooperate. Nor are partnership systems free of competition. But rather than the “dog-eat-dog” kind of competition found in domination systems, it is primarily driven by striving for excellence – a distinction we’re beginning to read about in business books, reflecting a shift in thinking appropriate for a partnership future.

Neither is the difference between partnership and domination systems that the former has a completely flat structure and the latter is hierarchical. Every society needs parents, teachers, managers, and leaders. The difference is between hierarchies of domination and hierarchies of actualization. In the latter, instead of flowing only from the bottom up, respect and accountability flow both ways, and power is used to empower rather than disempower others. So another current partnership trend is reflected in the business literature about the effective leader and manager no longer being a cop or controller but a man or woman who inspires and empowers others.

Configurations not coincidences

Books ranging from The Chalice and the Blade to The Real Wealth of Nations and Nurturing Our Humanity show that while no society is a pure domination or partnership system, the degree
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it orients to one or the other end of the partnership/domination social scale affects everything: from government, economic, and business policies to families, education, and religion (Eisler, 1988, 2007; Eisler & Fry, 2019).

Let’s start with three nations I mentioned earlier, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. In these secular western nations, we find a strong movement toward the three core components of partnership systems (Eisler, 2007). First, equality and democracy are greater in both the family and the state. Second, women have higher status, and with this came policies that are more caring of both people and nature, leading to low poverty rates, a good standard of living for all, and more investments in solar and other alternative energies. Third, these nations have been leaving behind traditions of violence: they pioneered laws making it illegal to use physical discipline against children in families; they introduced the first peace studies; they have a strong men’s movement to disentangle “masculinity” from its domination association with conquest, supremacy, and violence. These are not coincidences; they are configurations.

Neither is it coincidental that pushing women back into their “traditional” place was a top priority for the authoritarian, virulently violent, rightist Nazi regime in Germany. Or that when Stalin became dictator of the leftist USSR, he insisted on a return to the “traditional” family, with children born out of wedlock again labeled “illegitimate,” or that Stalin modeled brutality against women in his relationship with his wife, whom he drove to suicide.

Like these secular domination-oriented societies from both the right and left, religious demagogues – whether Muslim, Christian, or Hindu – are also committed to returning women to their “traditional” place in “traditional” families where men rule women and parents rule children through fear and force. These “fundamentalist” religious leaders advocate authoritarian theocratic rule, spread the dominator gospel of “holy wars,” and consider violence against women and children “moral.” So here again we see the three core elements of the configuration of domination systems: authoritarian rule, male dominance, and violence.

These religious leaders justify traditions of domination on religious grounds, but the problem is not religion. At the core of most religions are teachings of peace, justice, and caring that support partnership cultures. The problem is that the religious scriptures we inherited also support violence and domination; for example, passages in the Bible and Koran idealize violence against “infidels” and justify male control of women. We must sort out what we are told in the name of religion using the partnership-domination social scale.

Even our environmental crisis is largely a consequence of domination systems. We’re often told that the western scientific-industrial revolution that accelerated during the 18th century Enlightenment is to blame for the havoc we’re wreaking on our natural life-support systems. But the “conquest of nature” worldwide goes back much earlier.

In Genesis 1:28 we read that man is to “subdue” the earth and have “dominion … over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” In Genesis 3:16, we read that man is to rule over woman, who is to be his subordinate. However, the notion of male control over nature and of woman was not introduced in the Bible. We find it millennia earlier. And it is not only western.

For instance, the Enuma Elish, a famous Babylonian story from the Middle East, tells us that a new war god, Marduk, created land and sea by dismembering the body of the Mother Goddess Tiamat. That story, we also learn, superseded earlier ones about a Great Mother who created nature and humans through her life-giving powers. Clearly, this account of Creation represents a massive social shift to a domination system: one in which “masculinity” is equated with domination and violence.

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Social shifts

Evidence from archeology, anthropology, linguistics, and DNA studies shows that societies (and hence both men and women) oriented to the partnership rather than domination side of the scale for many millennia in prehistory. For example, the evidence shows that warfare is at most only 5,000 to 10,000 years old.

However, as detailed in The Chalice and the Blade, Sacred Pleasure, and Nurturing Our Humanity, during a time of great disequilibrium 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, in most world regions our cultural directions shifted from partnership to domination (Eisler, 1988, 1995; Eisler & Fry, 2019).

After that shift, there were intermittent partnership resurgences, followed by regressions to domination. For example, the partnership teachings of Jesus were followed by a Christian Church that became allied with the Roman emperor, violently persecuted Jews as well as Christians who were not “orthodox,” officially excluded women from its top-down hierarchy of priests, and launched the Inquisition and the witch-hunts in which thousands of women were tortured and publicly burned alive at the stake.

Then, starting about three hundred years ago, during the disequilibrium brought by the shift from the agrarian to the industrial age, we began to see strong movement toward a second major cultural shift: this time from domination to the partnership side of the social scale. So if we look at modern history from the partnership/domination perspective, we see that what otherwise seems random and disconnected actually follows a pattern.

One modern progressive movement after another challenged the same thing: a tradition of domination. The Enlightenment “rights of Man” movement challenged the “divinely ordained right” of kings to rule. The feminist and then women’s rights movements challenge the “divinely ordained right” of men to rule women and children in the “castles” of their homes. The abolitionist, anti-colonial, civil rights, and now Black Lives Matter movements challenge the “divinely ordained right” of a “superior race” to rule over “inferior” ones. The pacifist, peace, and most recently, the movement to end violence against women and children, challenge the use of force to impose or maintain rankings of domination. The movements for economic and social justice challenge top-down control and exploitation. The environmental movement challenges another tradition of domination: our once hallowed domination and conquest of nature that at our level of technological development could end our adventure on this Earth.

However, these movements have focused primarily on dismantling the top of the domination pyramid: politics and economics as conventionally defined. This left traditions of domination largely in place in family and other intimate relations: the ground on which domination systems have continued to rebuild themselves in one regression after another, whether through totalitarianism, authoritarianism, or religious fundamentalism.

In sum, like our familiar social categories and most of what we’ve been taught as “important knowledge and truth,” modern progressive movements have by large ignored or marginalized the majority of humanity: women and children. While logically this makes no sense, this domination thinking has been drummed into both our conscious and unconscious minds by our education. It should therefore not surprise us that highly educated people who consider themselves progressive often view anything connected with women and children as secondary to “more important matters.”

Indeed, as the historian of science David Noble documents in his book, A World Without Women (Noble, 1992), modern science came out of an all-male clerical, celibate culture that explicitly excluded women – so misogynist a culture that some scholars even debated whether
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women, like men, have an immortal soul. Of course, this was also a world without families and hence a world without children.

There is currently strong movement to challenge racism, inequality, and strongman rule, as well as for economic justice, environmental sustainability, and human rights. Yet all these movements are isolated from one another rather than part of an overarching progressive partnership political agenda. The women’s rights and children’s rights movements are still on the sidelines, with awareness of their social and political importance generally lacking.

To create a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable world, we need a comprehensive whole-systems-change agenda that, like the agenda of those pushing us back, includes women and children. Because of the urgent need for the long-term work to create and implement such an agenda, the rest of this chapter focuses on shifting four mutually supporting social cornerstones from domination to partnership:

The first cornerstone: Childhood

Neuroscience shows that the neural pathways of our brains are not set at birth. They are largely formed in interaction with a child’s early experiences and observations. Therefore, and this bears repeating, childhood provides the basis for how adults feel, think, and act, including how they vote.

As detailed in Nurturing Our Humanity (Eisler & Fry, 2019), domination-oriented families are training grounds for accepting top-down rankings and strongman rule. This is why, be it secular or religious, eastern or western, the domination political agenda places so much emphasis on teaching children, before their critical faculties are formed, that an authoritarian, male-headed, punitive family is divinely or biologically ordained.

Other social institutions such as religion and economics also reinforce this teaching. But it is in domination-oriented families that children acquire the convoluted psycho-social dynamics of denial, scapegoating, and susceptibility to strongman leaders needed for the imposition or maintenance of domination systems. And, as detailed in Nurturing Our Humanity, all this is reflected in the structure of the brain itself.

What happens in the stressful, fear, and force-based socialization characteristic of domination families, in addition to a tendency toward fight-or-flight as an inappropriate reaction to imagined threats, is that denial tends to become habitual. Specifically, children learn to repress their feelings of fear, hurt, and anger against the adults who cause them pain, since they are completely dependent on them for food, shelter, and other necessities for survival. These suppressed feelings are then channeled against out-groups that they are told by the authority figures in their cultures or subcultures are to blame for their problems.

So it is again not coincidental that in cultures where traditions of domination are strong we also find conspiracy theories that scapegoat out-groups – be it through racism in the United States, Shia vs. Sunni (or vice versa) in the Middle East, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and so forth. Nor is it coincidental that, especially in times of rapid change and/or hardships such as ours, people from domination family backgrounds are prone to even vote for demagogic strongman rule, since they feel more secure in these familiar situations.

People from these families, where caring and coercion are inextricably interlinked, also learn from their childhood observations, experiences, and teachings that violence is an acceptable, even moral, means of controlling others. So when these children grow up, they tend to perpetuate this teaching about violence in all relations – from intimate to international (Caspi et al., 2002). They also tend to perpetuate something else they learn in these families: to devalue women and anything considered “feminine,” such as caring and nonviolence.
I again want to emphasize that we are talking of systems dynamics involving beliefs and institutions – from the family, education, and religion to politics and economics. Nonetheless, just as domination-oriented families are an essential element of domination systems, partnership-oriented families that model mutually respectful, empathic, egalitarian relations are foundational to the movement toward partnership-oriented societies of equity, sustainability, and justice.

I further want to emphasize that partnership parenting is not laissez-faire, as many of us believed during the 1960s rebellion against domination. It means that parenting is authoritative rather than authoritarian, as well as nonviolent. The good news is that there is movement toward partnership parenting, with, for example, the American Psychological Association stating that spanking is not only ineffective as a means of discipline but also psychologically and physically harmful. The bad news is that surveys indicate that a majority of people worldwide still accept, and practice, spanking. They believe that using violence against a small dependent child is fine, even though it is criminal when used against an adult – which makes no sense, but is part of the domination thinking we inherited.

To change this thinking, we must engage both secular and religious leaders to take a strong stand against violence in families. Intimate violence not only blights and takes the lives of millions of children and women worldwide, but it also models the use of violence to impose one’s will as acceptable and normal – a teaching that can then be applied to all relations, including international ones.

A tool for leaving behind the domination system’s conflation of caring and coercion, including the “traditional” use of violence by parents and other caregivers, is the “Caring and Connected Parenting Guide” you can download in English and Spanish for free at www.centerforpartnership.org.

The second cornerstone: Gender

We’re not used to thinking of childhood and gender as key to creating a more equitable, caring, and sustainable world. But as briefly outlined in this chapter, to create this better world we must shift the ideal norms for how childhood and gender roles and relations are constructed from domination to partnership.

The evidence is clear that how a society constructs the roles and relations of the two basic forms of humans – male and female – not only affects women’s and men’s individual life options; but it affects families, education, religion, politics, economics, and technology. Domination systems are based on top-down rankings and in-group versus out-group thinking. And foundational to this system is the ranking of the in-group of “mankind” over the female “other” and the devaluation, and even demonization, of women.

This male over female template prepares people to equate difference with superiority or inferiority, dominating or being dominated, being served or serving – whether through racism, anti-Semitism, or scapegoating immigrants and other “out-groups.” People who acquire this mindset see only two possibilities: you either dominate or you are dominated. Not surprisingly then, domination regimes characteristically subordinate women and consider those who do not dominate weak and feminine, as Donald Trump repeatedly proclaimed.

In domination systems, socialization for conformity to rigid gender stereotypes starts in early childhood. This splitting of human traits and activities severely limits both men and women, as the current movement toward gender fluidity highlights. If a woman is assertive she is considered unfeminine and a “ballbreaker,” that is, a threat to men. Conversely, assertiveness, even aggression and violence, are highly valued as masculine, and mottos such as “boys will be boys” seek to explain aggressiveness and violence as natural for boys and men.
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Another part of our inheritance from more rigid domination times is what sociologist call “male as the norm.” This is building institutions such as workplaces according to beliefs and rules that ignore the needs, problems, and aspirations of girls and women. Again, the good news is that this problem is increasingly recognized and challenged. The bad news is that the domination system’s gender norms remain deeply entrenched, not only in many people’s minds but also in the operational systems of institutions, from the family and religion to education, politics, and economics.

Again, it bears repeating that what we are talking about is not a matter of women against men. Women in domination systems are also socialized to accept the ranking of male/masculine over female/feminine. So women in these kinds of cultures or subcultures are just as prone to consider men who deviate from the domination system’s definition of masculinity “sissies” or “weak sisters” and to accept the exclusion of women from positions of social and political leadership. We see this in the many women who joined Donald Trump in demeaning not only Hillary Clinton but women in general, and the women who are part of neo-Nazi groups such as the Proud Boys in the United States.

This all leads to a critical, still generally ignored, matter. This is that the domination system’s subordination of women and the “feminine” directly impacts a society’s guiding values—including, as we will see next, what is economically valued.

The third cornerstone: Economics

We’ve inherited a gendered system of values that devalues anything stereotypically associated with women or the feminine, such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence. Since in domination systems these are considered unfit for “real men,” in places where traditions of domination are still strong, we find higher investments in “hard” or “masculine” priorities like prisons, weapons, and war that impose or maintain domination. By contrast, where women are more highly valued, there is higher investment in caring for humans and nature, since caring is not devalued as “soft” or “feminine.”

We have empirical evidence showing these connections. Based on statistical data from 89 nations, already in 1995 the Center for Partnership System’s report *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life* documented that the status of women is a powerful predictor of general quality of life. Since then, studies such as the World Values Survey and the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Reports have confirmed this connection between women’s status and a nation’s economic success and quality of life.

Yet these findings are ignored, not only by economics departments and texts but also by the media—even though this relationship between gender equity and value systems is highly visible in nations such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway. These nations, which used to be so poor that there were famines, today regularly score high in the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness reports. They have the lowest gender gaps, with 40 to 50 per cent of national legislators female, low crime rates, high longevity scores, and are at the top of international happiness reports.

These are not ideal societies, but they don’t have huge gaps between haves and have-nots. They are not socialist societies; they have a healthy market economy precisely because their governments invest in caring for people, starting at birth, and hence in developing human capacities.

Their more equitable distribution of resources is not because they are relatively small and homogeneous; many relatively small homogenous nations are domination-oriented. It is because, as they often call themselves, they are caring societies: societies in which, along with the rise in women’s status, came more caring policies.
Indeed, a major reason for these nations’ rise from dire poverty to prosperity is that they pioneered investments in caring policies: universal health care, high-quality early childhood education, generous paid parental leave, and elder care with dignity. They were at the forefront of leaving behind traditions of violence, pioneering the first peace studies and the first laws against physical discipline in families. They are ahead in caring for nature, rapidly shifting to solar and other renewable energy sources.

In short, they invested heavily in our human infrastructure and our natural infrastructure, moving toward the **caring economics of partnerism** introduced in my book *The Real Wealth of Nations* (Eisler, 2007).

**The fourth cornerstone: Narratives and language**

Social psychology shows that the categories provided by a society’s language channel our thinking, making it almost impossible to see other alternatives. That is why we need the new whole-systems language of the *partnership system* and the *domination system* to understand what is needed to move forward.

New stories are also urgently needed, beginning with accurate stories about human possibilities. Studies show that the pleasure centers in our brains light up more when we share and care than when we win and dominate. As I mentioned, there is also mounting archeological and ethnographic evidence that a cultural orientation to partnership lasted for millions of years: first when humans lived as foragers and then in farming settlements like Catal Huyuk and Bronze Age civilizations like Minoan Crete.

We especially need new economic narratives that recognize the value of care work – be it caring for people in homes, social justice work, or environmental work, which takes us to an important step toward a caring economics of *partnerism*: new metrics that, unlike GDP and most current proposals for GDP alternatives, show the economic value of caring for people and nature.

In 2014, the Center for Partnership Systems developed a prototype of such metrics: 24 Social Wealth Economic Indicators (SWEIs). These measures take into account findings from neuroscience on how the quality of childhood care and education impacts human capacity development, and why investment in these areas is essential in our post-industrial knowledge age. They pay attention to women and children, which is essential to reduce poverty, which disproportionately affects women and children worldwide. They show the real situation of other “out-groups.” For example, they document that in the United States, even when care work is paid, wages are so low that many women who do this work, largely Latinas and African-Americans, have to rely on welfare for them and their families to survive.

Currently, the SWEIs are being updated and condensed into an easily accessible Social Wealth Index (SWI), as you can find at [https://centerforpartnership.org/programs/caring-economy/social-wealth-index/](https://centerforpartnership.org/programs/caring-economy/social-wealth-index/).

**Conclusion**

The movement toward creating a more partnership-oriented world has not failed. It is incomplete. It is up to us to complete this movement by using our creativity to focus on the four cornerstones of childhood, gender, a new economics of *partnerism*, and language and stories that more accurately reflect our past, present, and the possibilities for our future.

Human societies and economies are human creations. Joining together, we *can* create the missing foundations for a more sustainable, caring, and equitable world for ourselves, our children, and generations to come.

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References


Reeves, S. (2002). Personal communication.

For more resources, please see the books by Eisler cited above.