

**BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR CULTURES OF PEACE:
THE DEVASTATING LINK BETWEEN INTIMATE AND
INTERNATIONAL VIOLENCE
– AND HOW TO BREAK IT –**

By Riane Eisler

Nobel Prize Laureate Betty Williams and I have launched the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence(SAIV). This is a background paper. Please use it to dialogue with friends and colleagues, send letters to the editor, enlist organizations you belong to, and for your own writings and talks. For more information, please go to www.partnershipway.org

Why, despite countless international peace conferences and treaties, and despite the millions of people in the anti-war movement, are terrorism and warfare still daily facts of life in our world? Why do both rich and poor nations still use violence to impose their will? How can we change this?

Conventional wisdom says violence is just human nature – it's in our genes. But what matters is the interaction between genes and experience. Our life experiences, and thus our environments and our behaviors, play a major role in who we become, including even the neurochemistry of our brains. This is particularly true of what we experience in our early years. A pioneer in the study of the neurochemistry of abused children, Dr. Bruce Perry, tells us that children who are abused are more predisposed to become abusers and their brain neurochemistry tends to become programmed for fight-or-flight at the slightest provocation.

This does not mean that all children who are abused replicate these behaviors; on the contrary, some grow up to be adults that not only eschew violence but empathically work against violence. However, the psychological research shows that many people who are violent were themselves victims of violence.

Throughout history the most violently despotic and warlike cultures have been those where violence, or the threat of violence, is used to maintain domination of parent over child and man over woman. We have recently seen this connection in cultures that have spawned terrorists, where women and children are literally terrorized into submission. But the syndrome is not limited to so-called "religious fundamentalists." It was present in the European Middle Ages, in Hitler's Germany, in Stalin's Soviet Union. It is a disturbingly familiar pattern; and if we don't learn from history, we're doomed to repeat it.

Yet while there is much talk about economic and social factors behind warfare and terrorism, the link between *intimate violence* – in home and school – and *international violence* – in terrorism and war – is still largely ignored.

Human society is based, first and foremost, on relationships between the female and male halves of humanity and on their relations with their sons and daughters. Our first lessons about human relations are learned not in the public but in the private or intimate sphere. As children, in our families and in other intimate relationships we either learn respect for others and human rights or the acceptance of abuse and violence. While some people transcend teachings of violence and injustice, many carry these teachings into other relations, and accept violence and injustice as “just the way things are.” Thus, talk of a more peaceful world will be just that – *just talk* – unless this matter of the *foundations* we lay down in intimate relations is much more vigorously addressed.

A Legacy of Abuse and Violence

For most of recorded history parental violence against children and men’s violence against their wives was either explicitly or implicitly condoned. Those who had the power to prevent and/or punish this violence through religion, law, or custom, openly or tacitly approved it.

Because laws have, at least in some countries, been used to address this intimate violence, victims have begun to break their silence. But in many world regions, parents are not subject to what is still considered interference in family affairs and men who beat their spouses are also exempt from criminal prosecution. Some religious teachers still insist that punitive violence by parents against children and men against women is divinely ordained.

That the subject of intimate violence is receiving some attention today reflects major changes in cultural values and beliefs as well as in the structure of social institutions, from the family and education to politics and economics. These changes toward more democratic values and institutions are part of the shift from a dominator to a partnership model of social organization as the ideal norm (Eisler 1987, 1995, 1997; Eisler, Loye, and Norgaard 1995). But these changes have been met with enormous resistance and with periodic regressions.

Throughout history, regimes noted for their repressiveness and official violence have made the return of women to their "traditional" (or subservient) place in a male-headed family a priority. Even in democracies such as the United States, those who believe in the international violence of "holy wars" against “Godless enemies” oppose equal rights for women. They not only organized to defeat the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; they still oppose ratification of UN conventions to protect the rights of women and children. Such groups even lobbied for a "Family Protection" Act that would have cut funding for battered women's shelters – actually only protecting a family structure where male "heads of household" can legitimately exercise violent and despotic control.

Families where men are ranked over women, and where children painfully learn that questioning orders from above is dangerous to their physical and emotional welfare, are central to authoritarian, warlike cultures and subcultures. We see this historically and cross-culturally ((Eisler 1987,1995, 2000, 2002).

In the violent and authoritarian Roman Empire, the male head of household had life and death powers, not only over his slaves, but also over the women and children in his household. Similarly, under English Common Law, which developed during a time when monarchs

maintained their rule through fear and force, even extreme parental violence against children was not unlawful and husbands were legally permitted to beat their wives if they disobeyed them.

The connection between rigid male domination in the family and despotism in the state also helps explain customs such as the "honor killings" of girls and women by members of their own families, and the stoning of women for alleged sexual offenses, found in chronically violent areas where terrorism against defenseless civilians is seen as legitimate and honorable. It is through the rule of terror in the family that both women and men learn to accept rule by terror as "normal," be it in their own societies or against other tribes or nations.

Fortunately not all people raised in violent households become violent and brutal. But studies such as the classic *The Authoritarian Personality* document how individuals who participate in and/or acquiesce to authoritarianism, violence, and scapegoating in the state tend to be individuals from families where authoritarianism, violence, and scapegoating were also the norm. In other words, such studies verify what common sense would tell us: that the link between cruelty and violence in the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the state is all too real.

As psychotherapist Alice Miller pointed out, if we examine the childhoods of brutal despots such as Adolf Hitler, we see yet another link between the institutionalization of domination based on cruelty and terror in childrearing and the institutionalization of domination backed by cruelty and terror in the state. The biographies of such demagogic archcriminals reveal that their cruelty and violence, particularly their violent persecution of "inferior" or "dangerous" people, be they Jews in Germany, Blacks in the American South, or "disobedient" women in repressive cultures, is in large part rooted in the violence and cruelty they experienced as children.

The High Incidence of Intimate Violence

Much of the impetus for attention to violence against women has come from organized action by women, particularly during the United Nations Decade for Women (1975 - 1985) and through subsequent national and international meetings, such as the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, which led to the 1994 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and the 1995 United Nations Conference of Women in Beijing. Similarly, the work of children's right activists has finally brought violence against children global attention, bringing this issue into national and international meetings and into the United Nations, as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and U.N. documents such as *We the Children: Meeting the Promises of the World Summit for Children 2001*.

As a result of growing recognition that violence against women and children is one of the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights abuses in the world, have come statistical studies on rates of abuse from many nations. These studies show the extraordinary cultural and economic range of violence against women in intimate relations (see e.g., U.N. Report on Status of Women 1995). There are fewer studies comparing international rates of child abuse. However, studies of specific forms of child abuse reveal how pervasive the problem is, and how frequently female children are targeted. For example, the 1997 United Nations State of World Population Report estimated that 120 million girls have undergone some form of female genital mutilation, with

another two million young girls at risk each year, particularly in regions of Africa and Asia where this practice is performed under the mantle of religious or ethnic tradition.

There are data on selective female infanticide and medical neglect – a neglect that can be so severe that in India’s Punjab state, girls aged two to four die at nearly twice the rate of boys. There are also studies on the huge number of girl children enslaved (often offered for sale by members of their own families) in the global sex industry, for example, in Thailand, India, and the former Soviet Union. The United Nations estimates that two million girls between ages five and eleven are introduced into the commercial sex market each year (State of the World Population 1997).

Lori Heise reported in “Violence Against Women: The Missing Agenda” (1992), that one in three women worldwide has experienced violence from a spouse or partner. 42% of women in Kenya admitted that their husbands regularly beat them. In Papua, New Guinea, 67% of rural women and 56% of urban women had been abused by partners. A study from Lima, Peru showed that one out of every three women in the city’s emergency rooms were victims of domestic violence. According to estimates by the former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop in 1989, three to four million women are battered in the United States each year. In Bangladesh, husbands’ murders of their wives account for half of all homicides. In Bombay, India, one out of every five deaths among women fifteen to forty-four was due to “accidental burns” – that is, the infamous “bride-burnings” or “dowry deaths” that only recently attracted international media attention.

Beliefs about the legitimacy of men dominating women and of parents hitting children are central to the perpetuation of this violence; it not only related to family structure, but to the larger social structure and the prevailing system of values and beliefs. At the same time, the family is not only influenced by, but in turn also influences, the larger social structure and culture of which it is a part. What we see is a *transactive process* between families and cultures, with families and cultures based on top-down rankings exhibiting a high incidence of violence and abuse (Eisler 1995, 1997, 2002).

The Failure to Protect Women and Children

The failure to protect women and children from violence is sometimes justified by rhetoric about noninterference in the private or family sphere. This is why the distinction I have proposed between personal and family rights is critical (Eisler 1987b, 1992). Clearly a person's right to make certain private decisions should be free from governmental interference. But that is not the same as immunizing family decisions – or more specifically, the decisions of those who wield power in a family, from public scrutiny and regulation. Protection of personal rights is not synonymous with noninterference in actions within the family. In fact, there often is a direct conflict between the two.

Another familiar argument against "outside interference" in family affairs is that the family is the repository of traditional religious and/or cultural values with which neither laws nor governments, much less international agencies, should be permitted to interfere. But once again, if we go beneath the rhetoric to the realities and re-examine what is at stake, we see that the issue is not so much preserving religious or cultural traditions, but of preserving those traditions that

maintain a particular form of familial and social organization. We also see that from the very beginning it has been precisely the re-examination – and rejection – of cultural and/or religious traditions that has fueled the modern movement for human rights and democracy.

The whole basis of the modern human rights and democracy movements is the rejection of autocratic cultural traditions backed up by fear and force. The autocratic rule of kings was once justified, and staunchly defended, by religious authorities that claimed that kings and other "noblemen" have a divinely ordained right to rule. It was also defended by secular philosophers such as Edmund Burke – who argued that the doctrine of "the rights of man would lead to the utter subversion, not only of all government, in all modes, but all stable securities to rational freedom, and all the rules and principles of morality itself."

This kind of rhetoric is all too familiar, as it is still in our time used to oppose "women's rights" and "children's rights" by some religious authorities and secular writers who claim women's and children's rights are subversive of the moral order, a threat to family and social stability, and a violation of tradition.

This cry against interference within ethnic and/or religious traditions is even raised to defend genital mutilation. Due to the challenge by women's rights advocates around the world, some national leaders have condemned such practices, and a few international human rights organizations have also taken a stand. But to date no major religious leader has taken a strong stand against this barbaric form of torture.

Instead, some religious leaders still speak of the practice as an important cultural tradition. Of course, every institutionalized behavior, including cannibalism and slavery, is a cultural tradition. Surely no one today would dare to justify cannibalism or slavery (which were once also traditional practices in certain cultures) on cultural or traditional grounds.

It is high time that the traditions of intimate violence against women and children be recognized for what they are: brutal practices to exert control through the infliction or fear of pain. It is also high time that this issue receives political as well as moral condemnation worldwide, if not for the sake of those directly affected, then because the connections between intimate and international violence today threaten us all.

A Call to Action

With the specter of biological or nuclear terrorism and warfare hanging over us, both religious and secular leaders have spoken out against international violence. *But we also urgently need to hear their voices raised against the intimate violence that sparks, fuels, and refuels international violence.*

It should be enough to say that intimate violence must stop because of the horrible damage it causes to the millions of children and women directly affected. But it has not been enough. Nor has it been enough to point to the massive economic and social costs of this violence, even though this too has been extensively documented.

I realize that it is not easy to challenge traditions, even when they are inhuman. It is often

unpopular, and can sometimes be dangerous, since domination and violence in intimate and inter-group relations are encoded in some religious and ethnic traditions

But if we do not address these cornerstones of violence and abuse, we will not have the foundations for a more equitable, peaceful, and sustainable future. Surely, if the connection between intimate violence and international violence becomes better understood, more will finally be done to end this terrible worldwide human scourge.

The purpose of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV) is to bring the link between intimate and international violence to the attention of policy makers and the public at large. Since the majority of people are religious, SAIV is also a call to spiritual leaders, both well-known and grass-roots, to spread the message that intimate violence will no longer be condoned. Religious leaders have moral authority. Their authority must be used to help end the epidemic of intimate violence that blights, and often takes, the lives of so many women and children, and that, unabated, will continue to undermine all efforts to create a more peaceful and just world.

Intimate violence and international violence are as tightly bound together as the fingers of a clenched fist. Only if we vigorously oppose intimate violence and abuse, and teach relations based on mutual respect and caring rather than violence and domination in intimate relations, will we have the foundations for cultures of peace, as intimate violence provides a basic model for using force to impose one's will.

Riane Eisler is best known for her bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade*, which has been translated into 19 languages, including Chinese, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese, and *Tomorrow's Children*, which was just translated into Urdu for use by educators in Pakistan. Her most recent book is *The Power of Partnership*, a guidebook for individual and social transformation that applies her research to personal and political action.

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