

REVITALIZING THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR REAL DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM

By Riane Eisler

Millions of us are working for a more equitable, caring, peaceful, truly democratic and free society. Today, these goals are seriously threatened, both in the United States and worldwide. We are at a historic juncture when we are challenged to go deeper. Now is the time to reassess and expand the progressive agenda, starting with core principles and methods. It is a time to assess what has been missing and formulate long-range strategies.

A central lesson from history is that regressive leaders who rely on fear and force recognize the foundational importance of family and other intimate relations in the establishment of social values and political and economic structures. The reason for their intensive focus on these relations is that the construction of family and other intimate relations directly influences what people consider normal and moral in *all* relations – public as well as private. Family relations affect how people think and act. They affect how people vote and govern, and whether the policies they support are just and genuinely democratic, or violent and oppressive.

Yet if we look at progressive politics and media, progressives have basically ceded values for family and other intimate relations to the regressive fundamentalist bloc. If you pick up *The American Prospect*, *The Nation*, and other progressive journals, other than an occasional mention of hot-button issues such as abortion and homosexual marriage, you don't read about developing and mainstreaming progressive family policies and practices. Relinquishing the definition of "family values" to the regressives has been, and will continue to be, disastrous.

Regressives have successfully pushed our culture back by insisting on a male dominated, hierarchical structure of family. U.S. fundamentalists stress the "headship" of the father in the family, with women and children subordinate to the will of the father. Whether Khomeini in Iran, Hitler in Germany, the Taliban in Afghanistan, or some fundamentalists in the United States, dictatorial leaders always give top priority to "getting women back into their traditional place" in a "traditional family" – a code phrase for a punitive, authoritarian family where women are subordinate and economically dependent, and children learn their parents' (usually father's) will is law. These early lessons then translate into dominator political and social structures, because people often vote in ways that unconsciously replicate their early family experiences.

Slogans like "traditional values" have often marketed a family where fathers make the rules and harshly punish disobedience – the kind of family that prepares people to defer to "strong" leaders who brook no dissent and use force to impose their will. These slogans have masked a family "morality" suited to undemocratic, rigidly male-dominated, chronically violent cultures.

We can, and must, offer a progressive partnership family agenda to counter the regressive "family values" agenda. We are forming a coalition of progressives from all sectors, religious and secular, to articulate the family values and policies appropriate for truly democratic families and societies. Our purpose is to develop clear goals, a think tank to articulate family as a progressive value, guidelines for public policies, and social marketing strategies that can reach people's hearts and minds.

Principles

Historically, the political and economic top of the domination pyramid has continued to rebuild itself because we haven't changed its foundations. A pro-family, pro-child, partnership political agenda is essential for long-term structural change. People first learn respect for human rights or to accept

human rights violations as normal in the foundational human relations: the relations between the female and male halves of humanity and between them and their daughters and sons.

A progressive family pro-family agenda is not about left vs. right or liberal vs. conservative. It's about constructing and strengthening the psychological and cultural foundations for a less violent, more equitable world. It's about how we organize our society for the benefit of all.

A progressive family agenda is informed by the principles at the core of both religion and humanism: principles that support caring and equity. It is *not* about discarding religion. It's about building on the partnership elements of religion that support compassion, justice, and nonviolence, while rejecting those that justify domination, violence, and injustice – starting with our primary relations. This is no simple undertaking because the “traditional” family values that are being promoted by regressives have been so effectively marketed, beguiling people with “Christian” agendas that actually violate Christian teachings.

The task at hand for progressives is to invite responsible policy makers, leaders, the media, and the general public to look with fresh eyes at the meaning of the term “family,” “values,” and “morality,” to redefine these terms in ways based on partnership, mutual respect, and caring rather than domination, top-down control, and coercion.

Analysis

Family relations are microcosms of social relations. In a top-down, authoritarian family that relies on fear and force, children often learn to be in denial about their parents' behavior since they depend on them for survival: for food, shelter, and protection from strangers. This makes it easy to later be in denial about “strong” leaders who abuse power, and to identify with them instead – particularly in times of actual or perceived external danger such as ours.

Family relations based on domination and submission also teach important lessons about violence. When children experience violence, or observe violence against their mothers, they learn it's acceptable to use force to impose one's will on others.

Not everyone from families based on domination and submission fits these patterns – but many people do if they don't gain access to more egalitarian relationship models. Studies show, for example, that men from authoritarian, abusive families tend to vote for “strong-man” leaders. Also, they tend to support punitive rather than caring social policies.

To build cultures of justice, safety, and democracy, we need families where women and men are equal partners, where children learn to act responsibly because adverse consequences follow from irresponsible behavior, where they learn to help and persuade rather than hurt and coerce, where they're encouraged to think for themselves.

Toward a Progressive Family Values Agenda

We are here offering some initial guidelines for a progressive agenda on family relations based on a common principle: the transformation from domination to partnership as the model for personal, social, economic, and political relations.

This agenda has three goals:

1. To help develop and disseminate progressive values that promote intimate relations based on *partnership* – mutual respect, accountability, and caring.

2. To show how the current definition of “traditional family values” is based on a selective reading of scriptures that supports a system of top-down rankings of *domination* ultimately backed up by fear and force.
3. To show why a more just, democratic, and peaceful world requires a reframing of ethics for family relations.

A progressive pro-family, pro-child, pro-democracy political agenda will:

1. Focus on the rights of children to have a fair opportunity to grow-up healthy and thrive, including the right to shelter, nutrition and health care, freedom from violence, and a clean environment.
2. Promote equality between women and men.
3. Support all families, whether children are parented by a man and woman, a single parent, or two parents of the same sex.
4. Promote an economic vision where the drive for productivity does not overshadow the value of having parents spend time with their children.
5. Support parents with policies such as a living wage, paid parental leave, high quality childcare, and preschool education for all children.
6. Protect reproductive freedom and show that the only way to prevent abortions is to provide family planning and sex education, as do other nations with much lower abortion rates.
7. Provide education for healthy, nonviolent family relations and parenting for both boys and girls, as offered by Nordic nations, which have much lower crime rates, prosperous economies, longer life spans, and regularly rate at the top of the U.N. Human Development Reports.
8. Promote real educational reform through small classrooms and small schools where every child has individual support and attention.
9. Take a stand against corporate practices that harm children – from toxic dumps and other forms of environmental pollution to marketing unhealthy food and drinks – and recognize that we must address global warming and other environmental problems that threaten our children’s future.
10. Make ratification of United Nations conventions to protect women and children a top priority.
11. Take a strong stand against intimate violence – the violence against women and children in families and other intimate relations that is a mainspring for learning to use violence to impose one’s will on others.

Family Violence as a Key Moral Issue

Rather than focusing on current notions of what *form* constitutes a moral family, a progressive political platform should focus on what kinds of family *behavior* is moral and try to effect change in those traditions that are unjust and violent.

- ‘ We must focus attention on the global pandemic of violence against women and children that a U.N. report called the most ubiquitous violation of human rights worldwide (UNICEF study, 1997).
- ‘ We must educate policy makers about the link between intimate violence and national and international violence.
- ‘ As a long-term strategy for changing reliance on force to “solve” problems worldwide foreign aid should focus on changing traditions of family violence.

Consider these statistics: Each year 40 million children under the age of 15 are victims of family abuse or neglect serious enough to require medical attention (U.N. We the Children: Meeting the Promises of the World Summit for Children 2001). A woman is battered, usually by her intimate partner, every 15 seconds in the United States. (U. N. Study on the Status of Women, 2000). In China and India, millions

of baby girls are killed or abandoned by their parents. “Honor” killings by other family members result in the death of thousands of women in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries (Ending Violence Against Women: Human Rights in Action, 2003). 20 percent of women and 5-10 percent of men have suffered sexual abuse as children (World Report on Violence and Health, 2002, WHO). Each year, an estimated 2 million girls undergo some form of female genital mutilation (U.N. The World’s Women 2000: Trends and Statistics). Child abuse alone costs the United States economy \$94 billion a year (Violence Creates Huge Economic Cost for Countries, WHO Report, 2004).

Intimate violence and national and international violence are as tightly bound together as the fingers of a clenched fist. If we’re serious about a more peaceful world, vigorously addressing intimate violence must be a top priority for both secular and religious leaders. This is the purpose of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV) co-founded by human rights activist and author Riane Eisler and Nobel Peace Laureate Betty Williams (For more information, please see www.saiv.net).

A Call to Action

How can we expect people raised in authoritarian families where men are ranked over women, and children learn that any questioning of authority will be severely punished, to vote for leaders whose policies promote relations of mutual respect, responsibility, democracy, and nonviolence? How can we build societies respecting human rights when millions of people grow up in families that routinely violate human rights?

- ‘ Let’s make ending family violence and other forms of intimate violence a top religious and secular issue that speaks to the heart of all people who care about children and families.
- ‘ Let’s bring together both secular and religious groups already working for policies that support families where mutual respect and accountability, rather than inequality and rote conformity to orders for fear of harsh punishment, are modeled.
- ‘ Let’s work with religious groups towards supporting real spirituality: compassion, empathy, and non-violence.
- ‘ Let’s reach out to the people who are finding community and spirituality in religious institutions that preach fundamentalist ideas by helping them focus on these basic moral issues – and let’s show that this is essential to build foundations for the less violent, more equitable, safer future everyone wants.

Forming a coalition of progressive politicians, organizations, foundations, and businesses to support a long-range family values agenda to counter regression and move our culture and political system forward is the essential next step for progressives. We invite leaders from all sectors – secular and religious – to flesh out this agenda. The next step will be to enlist the best social marketing, word-smithing, and PR talent to implement a strategy that reaches peoples’ hearts and minds.

This is what people can – and will – respond to if we are clear and passionate in our message with standards and stories that inspire and transform beliefs, behaviors, and policies. Then we can resume the movement toward realizing the American dream of democracy, freedom, and justice for all.

Riane Eisler is best known for her international bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade*, as well as the award-winning *Sacred Pleasure*, *Tomorrow’s Children*, and *The Power of Partnership*. She is co-founder of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (www.saiv.net), and president of the Center for Partnership Studies www.partnershipway.org.

Riane spoke at the Praxis Peace Institute Culture and Mythos series on June 22, 2005. Audio CDs are available of that talk from Praxis Peace Institute. She also spoke at two Praxis conferences (Dubrovnik – 2002, and Asilomar - 2004).