

10-14-2016

A Conversation with Charlotte Bunch: Seeing Women's Rights as Human Rights

Riane Eisler
Center for Partnership Studies

Follow this and additional works at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps>

Recommended Citation

Eisler, Riane (2016) "A Conversation with Charlotte Bunch: Seeing Women's Rights as Human Rights," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 2. Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/vol3/iss3/2>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

The *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing. Authors retain ownership of their articles, which are made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial license (CC BY-NC 4.0).



A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLOTTE BUNCH SEEING WOMEN'S RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS:

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

Abstract:

IJPS Editor-in-Chief Riane Eisler interviews Charlotte Bunch, BA, PhD (hon) founding director and senior scholar at the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, where she is also a distinguished professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies.

Keywords: human rights, women's rights, LGBT movement, Center for Women's Leadership

Copyright: ©2016 Eisler. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Noncommercial Attribution license (CC BY-NC 4.0), which allows for unrestricted noncommercial use, distribution, and adaptation, provided that the original author and source are credited.

Riane Eisler: Charlotte, as you know, one of the keys to shifting to a more just and caring world is to leave behind gender roles and relations in which women, and traits and activities still stereotypically associated with women such as nonviolence and caregiving, are subordinated and devalued, whether in women or men or in social policy. You have been a tireless champion for the human rights of women. What in your life led you to this work?

Charlotte Bunch: I began my political life and interest in human rights as a student at Duke University in North Carolina in the 1960s, where the Civil Rights Movement was active. Through the Methodist Student Movement and the YWCA, I participated in my first demonstrations, and learned about the social gospel tradition in my church as well as Liberation Theology and the writings of Black political thinkers like James Baldwin. The energy, passion, and vision of changing the world in the civil rights movement inspired and propelled me forward. Gradually, it expanded to a larger understanding of politics - that racism wasn't just unfair but also that an entire social

and economic system had been constructed around it. It taught me to think more systematically about why something happened and to learn the complexities of working for social change.

My parents instilled in me an interest in the globe; they were small town liberals in New Mexico where I grew up, who had once planned to be missionaries in China. While they taught us equality and being fair, I experienced my mother's frustrations as a housewife whose intellect and capabilities had few outlets, and when feminism exploded in the late 1960s, I was there. Literally. I was working at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in Washington DC and facing barriers that many women have described, in which I would speak and nobody would respond. But when a man would say virtually the same thing, it was greeted with "Oh, what a great idea!" Several of us based at IPS started a radical women's discussion group in 1968, and it soon grew into the DC Women's Liberation Movement. IPS gave me space and a political context for developing feminist ideas, projects, and publications like *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, which I edited for almost a decade.

Coming to see women's rights as human rights in the late 1980s was really coming full circle for me, back to human rights. While working with women's groups globally, and especially in Latin America and Asia, I began to ask why issues like sex tourism, sexual torture of political prisoners, and rape in war were not understood as human rights issues. Why were victims of such gender-based abuses not given refuge? This led to my exploration of a feminist perspective on human rights and my work over the past 25 years for women's human rights.

Eisler: What cultural benefits have you seen when women experience more equality?

Bunch: As the United Nations and other institutions have begun to document, nations thrive when they utilize the talents of all their population, women as well as men, and other traditionally marginalized groups. When women are educated and become fully equal in access to all parts of the society, they provide new ideas for solutions to

problems that come from their diverse experiences. Generally, but not always, women are more inclusive in the initiatives they take, and often open up new channels for cooperation among people that bring in more stakeholders. Culturally and politically, a wider, richer range of options and cultural expressions emerges when women are treated equally.

Eisler: You have also been active in the LGBTQ movement, confronting yet another entrenched tradition of discrimination and domination. What do you see as commonalities, as well as differences, between the women's rights movement and the LGBTQ movement?

Bunch: Both the women's and the LGBTQ movements are identity-based, in the sense that they begin with the recognition that certain populations face discrimination and oppression based on 'who they are,' and advocating for changes centered on affirming rather than denigrating that identity. This requires confronting traditional, and often sensitive, ideas about gender and sexuality. As a result, both movements are often opposed by the same conservative religious and cultural forces. Both movements must also deal with what feminists call 'intersectionality' - that is, the multiple ways in which women and LGBT people are also affected by other factors that intersect with their gender, such as race, class, age, physical abilities, culture, religion etc., and which can divide us among ourselves.

One of the big differences between the movements is that the LGBTQ movement is a 'minority' rights movement and can argue for the acceptance of their 'differences' as a minority without necessarily challenging the personal lives of heterosexuals. On the negative side, this means that LGBTQ people can more easily be 'othered,' - treated as less than fully human and dismissed, as some people claim not to know anyone who is gay and try to distance themselves from the issue. Equality for women, however, touches everyone, as everyone has 'females' in their lives. It implies changes both politically and personally in all our lives. The LGBTQ movement is therefore essentially about a more singular issue - how a culture organizes itself around sexual

orientation and expression. While this is often controversial and can lead to stigmas and violence, once attitudes change in this area, many other changes follow from it. The women's movement, however, cannot be single-issue, as the number of ways in which society is affected by the place and role of women is multiple, complex, and woven into institutions in ways that require more than just 'minority' acceptance and touch everyone positively and/or negatively.

Eisler: Why do you think LGBTQ rights have been moving forward quickly, at least in the West, yet the movement for women's empowerment has stalled, with, for example, reproductive rights under attack and retrenchment in the United States?

Bunch: The different trajectories of acceptance of these movements flows from my points above. Allowing an LGBTQ minority to have human rights may be objectionable to some, but it is ultimately less threatening personally to non-gay people. For example, marriage equality may be seen as bad, but it does not really change heterosexual marriage - no matter how much some try to argue that it will! Equality of women in all marriages, however, does require the personal transformation of most people's lives. Achievement of full reproductive rights for women, including access to safe abortion, is so controversial precisely because it is a key component of equality and sexual autonomy for women. This is a power that some men and male-bound institutions do not want to relinquish.

Further, in the US at least, the advances of the LGBTQ movement have also been underwritten by the money and power of many gay people, especially white gay men. They have effectively used their economic privilege and power to demand changes in government policy, as seen in such places as Indiana and North Carolina, where powerful corporate and sports boycotts have followed anti-LGBTQ state policies. So far, nothing as powerful has followed anti-abortion or racial voting restrictions in these states, but hopefully it will as these movements make more powerful alliances.

Eisler: Violence against women (VAW) and girls, often still justified in the name of tradition or religion, is a global pandemic with disastrous personal, social, and economic consequences. What progress do you see in this vital area, and what obstacles are in the way?

Bunch: Measured by where the world was 40 years ago, there has been enormous progress in bringing the issue of VAW and girls into the public arena and beginning to quantify it and expose its multiple manifestations and terrible toll on society. When the UN International Women's Year (1975) and then UN Decade on Women (1976-85) began, the issues of VAW - rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual trafficking, child marriage etc. - were almost unknown, and when known, spoken about only in whispers. Today, these are highly visible and on the agendas of almost all governments, international and regional organizations, media, civil society and community groups. This process has involved exposing the magnitude and variety of such violence in ways that have made it appear to be on the increase. While we do not know if it is increasing or just being made better known, it is terrible and touches the lives of almost all of us. Nevertheless, bringing this issue into the light of day and having laws and policies aimed at stopping it adopted in almost every country over the past two decades is important progress.

The challenge now is to move from awareness and exposure to significantly reducing VAW and ending impunity for it. In many places around the world, women who have the resources and/or the personal courage to speak up now have access to avoiding and/or escaping such VAW. But far too many women, and especially girls, are still vulnerable to it. There are many obstacles in the way of change, but I think the most important are the unwillingness of many to sanction those who commit this violence and the weakness of social institutions in combatting it.

Making violence against women and girls unacceptable requires changes in family and community attitudes toward violators in their midst as well as willingness to challenge cultural and religious authorities who cover up it up. It also requires greater political

will from governments and the commitment of more resources to counter it. Ending VAW is a huge challenge, but there are big cracks in the wall everywhere you look - from the commitment by the Secretary General of the UN and the World Bank to take leadership on combatting it, to the banning of sports, political, and entertainment figures who are implicated in such actions. Perhaps most importantly, an issue that has been driven by the women's movement at the local level for years is finally seeing more men as well as women taking responsibility for speaking up and taking action to counter VAW in their own communities. This is the process necessary for cultural change to happen.

Eisler: I have proposed that international law, especially the Rome Statute's "Crimes Against Humanity" section should be used to hold governments accountable when they fail to enact and/or enforce laws against these systematic and egregious violations of women's human rights. How do you think this proposal could gain support?

Bunch: I think this is an excellent proposal. Such a strategy was pursued by the Center for Constitutional Rights in the US, along with the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). They proposed to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) that it should investigate the Vatican for crimes against humanity for its failure to hold priests accountable for their sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests. While the ICC did not take up this case, the work done documenting it became part of the questioning of the Vatican by the UN Committee that monitors the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and contributed to putting pressure on the Vatican to change its policies.

I hope that more civil society advocacy groups and treaty monitoring bodies will pursue this idea. The Rome Statutes against gender-based persecution and violence that women fought for in the founding of the ICC should be cited in legal cases and in non-governmental shadow reports to UN treaties. Rape in war is now understood as a war crime because of the work that civil society groups have done to expose this issue

and demand accountability for it. Similarly, other forms of violence against women can be documented and taken to national, regional, and global courts in ways that show a government's failure to prevent, protect, or provide redress for these massive crimes against humanity.

Eisler: You founded the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University, dedicated to fostering women's leadership for women's human rights and social justice. Please tell us about its work and your role in it.

Bunch: I was the Executive Director for the first 20 years of CWGL, during which time we focused on bringing a gendered feminist perspective to human rights through our advocacy work at the UN and in women's leadership development activities. We organized leadership institutes and strategic planning meetings for feminist leaders to learn about and make strategies for advancing women's rights as human rights in the context of UN and national policy making. We contributed to developing a core of feminist advocates in all regions who have been central to building a global movement for accountability to human rights and to the defense of women's human rights defenders.

In 1991, CWGL initiated the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence Campaign to bring violence against women onto the human rights agenda locally and globally. From November 25 to December 10, 2016, this campaign, which is now active in over 100 countries, will observe its 25th anniversary. CWGL also continues to bring advocates together to influence UN policy around women's human rights through a variety of coalitions, such as the one formed for the UN Post 2015 process. (See www.cwgl.rutgers.edu) I am still teaching these issues at Rutgers University, and serve as a senior adviser to CWGL programs.

Eisler: I see that the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers has been focusing more on economics. As you know, this is also an area I have been working in through the Center for Partnership Studies' Caring Economy Campaign, which

addresses one of the root causes of women's disproportionate poverty worldwide: the failure of conventional economic theories and metrics to include the economic value of the work of care still primarily performed by women for free in homes and for poverty wages in the market. What can women leaders do to change the devaluation of this 'women's work,' and the tragic consequences of this devaluation for women, children, and society at large?

Bunch: While this is not my area of expertise, I am glad that the new leadership at CWGL over the past six years has been addressing these questions more directly. I agree that giving greater value and resources to work around the care economy is vital to the future advancement of women's rights, and indeed all human life and rights. Female and male leaders must pay greater attention to policies around childcare, family leave, elder care, pay equity, etc. As so much of this work is done by women, we must demonstrate that we value it as real work if this imbalance is to be redressed. This was an issue advocated by the Women's 2015 Coalition (led by CWGL) in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals by the UN this past year. I commend you and your Center's Campaign on the Caring Economy, as this should be one of the leading issues of the next decade.

Eisler: What do you think are the most effective steps to empower women and move to a more just and caring world for everyone?

Bunch: I think the most important steps for the empowerment of women have come from the various ways in which women have organized to support each other and build movements or groups that enable women to stand up for themselves and take risks, whether personal or economic. Therefore, support for such movement organizing work at every level is vital.

One of the most promising trends in this regard is the growth in the diversity of women's constituencies claiming their rights and being politically active in social movements as well as political parties and government. Indigenous, immigrant,

disabled, lesbian, widowed, and domestic women workers as well as racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities have come forward with their particularized stories of discrimination and strategies for change. They are engaged in women's movements as well as other social movements...around land, environment, etc., and are increasingly entering the organized political world as well. This has added to an understanding of the intersection of gender with other factors, such as race and class, and points to the potential of ending marginalization based on differences among us.

Economic empowerment is obviously also critical to women's ability to engage politically and to control their lives and bodies, as well as work to transform society. In that regard, the growth in economic inequality generally in the world raises serious questions of how to achieve substantive equality for all women. This is one of the key problems for women's movements today, as it has increased the gap among women, between those whose lives have improved with the gains of feminism and those who have been left behind - perhaps even further marginalized as the gap between rich and poor, connected and powerless, has widened and deepened in the world. This growing inequality gap among women - as well as among men across the world and within nations - is troubling for any vision of transformation to a more just and caring world

Eisler: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Bunch: I would like to end on the positive note that feminist and human rights movements have advanced greatly the potential for women to enjoy greater human rights, which is critical to a more just and caring world. We must build on this positive trend of a greater diversity of women claiming their rights and entering political life in order to counter the dangerous trend of growing economic inequality. This also requires more cross-movement alliances and coalitions, as those seeking justice and a more caring world come to respect and support each other in more concrete ways. Given the changes for women that have come in the past 40 years, the time is ripe for

women to take greater leadership in seeking to redress these imbalances and building a society that cares for everyone and moves us closer to realizing the universality of the promise of human rights for all.

Charlotte Bunch, BA, PhD(hon), is a leader for human rights, especially women's rights, author, recipient of numerous awards, founding director and senior scholar at the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, and distinguished professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies. Awards include induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in October 1996; the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights in December 1999; the "Women Who Make a Difference Award" from the National Council for Research on Women in 2000; and her selection as one of "21 Leaders for the 21st Century" by Women's E-news in 2002.

Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon), is president of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS), Editor in Chief of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, and author of numerous books, including *The Chalice and the Blade*, *Tomorrow's Children*, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, and most recently (with Teddie Potter), *Transforming Interprofessional Partnerships*. She keynotes conferences worldwide and consults on applications of the partnership model introduced in her work. For more information, see www.rianeeisler.com

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Riane Eisler J.D., PhD (h), at center@partnershipway.org