

PARTNERSHIP POLICIES: A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER SIEBEL NEWSOM, THE FIRST PARTNER OF CALIFORNIA

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

Abstract

Riane Eisler interviews Jennifer Siebel Newsom, wife of the Governor of California, the most populous U.S. state, who chose the title First Partner rather than First Lady to describe her position. In addition to her role in crafting partnership government policies, Jennifer is a mother, actress, and noted filmmaker, whose documentaries *Miss Representation*, *The Mask You Live In*, and *The Great American Lie* have gained wide acclaim. She has been a leader in California and internationally in raising awareness of the need for, and benefits of, caring partnership government policies.

Keywords: partnership; government policies; female political leaders; gender equity; education; documentaries; caring economics; violence against women; childcare.

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Riane Eisler: You utilize the term “First Partner” to describe the spouse of an elected government leader like your husband, California Governor Gavin Newsom. Can you tell us what in your background led you to do this?

Jennifer Siebel Newsom: I chose to go by First Partner because I wanted to signal up front what my values are in this role. For me, the choice to go by First Partner was a continuation of the work I’ve been doing at The Representation Project to break down

limiting stereotypes and norms around gender. The title is both gender inclusive and gender expansive, helping pave the way for all the different types of couples who may be in this role, and it disrupts some of the male-coded language we associate with leadership, versus a “lady” who sits on the sidelines.

And ultimately, it is about elevating the concept of partnership. People do not succeed alone; people succeed because of a community of support. I wanted to start elevating that concept, because that is how we will move our country and our state forward, in partnership.

Eisler: You have been active politically for a long time, working for more caring policies and greater economic and social equity. What led you in this direction?

Siebel Newsom: I have always been interested in lifting up women and their families, and started my career working in Latin America and Africa helping Indigenous women start micro-enterprises. I saw firsthand how, when you put money into a mother’s hands, she turned around and invested that in her children’s health and well-being and their education and betterment.

After business school, I started working in Hollywood, and I saw how that industry was completely disregarding, demeaning, and degrading women and girls. So, I began to look at our gendered socialization, and how that was impacting women in leadership, and in our culture at large. I saw that we were telling our girls that their value was in their youth, beauty, and sexuality, rather than in their capacity to lead, and that ultimately, this was leading to an underrepresentation of women in positions of power and influence.

I then started to flip the lens and look at masculinity, and how we were harming boys and men with limited notions of what it means to be a man. But what I realized in

flipping the lens is that our society isn't just harming individual men and boys by telling them that their value is in their dominance, control, and aggression. Instead, our entire system, including our government and our economy, is being affected by this gender hierarchy, and valuing hypermasculine norms that tell us to prioritize power, dominance, money, and aggression at the expense of values we have "feminized," like care, empathy, and collaboration.

Eisler: You have been particularly focused on childhood, which as documented in my book, [*Nurturing Our Humanity*](#) (for which you gave a strong endorsement), profoundly impacts nothing less than how our brains develop. Could you talk about this, both as a mother yourself and in relation to partnership-oriented government programs?

Siebel Newsom: As a mother of four, it is extremely important to me that we focus on both the mental and physical health and wellbeing of our children. When we invest in our children, we are investing in our future.

That's why I am really proud that in under the Newsom Administration in California we have had a major focus on early childhood development and a "parent's agenda" that lifts up family-friendly policies. Just this week, Governor Newsom signed a bill extending job-protected family leave to another 6 million Californians. This policy is critical not only to investing in our children from the earliest ages, but also to elevating the value of care and caregiving across California, and building a partnership-oriented economy that uplifts women and families, valuing parents in their dual roles as caregivers and breadwinners.

Eisler: You have been a tireless champion for the rights of women. How does everyone benefit when women have more equality?

Siebel Newsom: The bottom line is that when women's voices and experiences are valued, when women's needs (particularly the needs of the most marginalized women)

are listened to and prioritized, and when a plurality of diverse women have seats at the tables of power, entire families, communities, and our society are all better off. And the proof is everywhere! Across the globe, research shows that when you empower women with equal access to education, economic opportunities, and decision making, whole families and communities are lifted up.

In government, the evidence points to the fact that women leaders tend to make decisions that more positively benefit the community as a whole. In fact, women legislators sponsor more bills, pass more laws, send more money to their districts, and are more likely to introduce legislation that specifically helps women and children.

And across businesses, countless studies have shown that the more women you have in leadership, the greater the creativity and productivity, and the better the bottom line.

Eisler: As you know, worldwide, women perform most of the work of caring for people, starting in early childhood, for low wages in workplaces and for free in homes. What can be done to change the devaluation of this “women’s work,” and the consequences of that devaluation in poverty and hardships for women and children?

Siebel Newsom: This is the critical issue at the heart of economic inequality. If you look at the wage gaps that exist across the United States, a big factor is job segregation, where women work in industries that have been devalued, the outcome being that they earn less money. In addition, it was recently reported that if American women were paid minimum wage for their unpaid labor, that collectively they would have made \$1.5 trillion dollars more last year. So, valuing “women’s work” is essential to uplifting our communities, and it requires shifts in both policy and in our culture.

On the policy side, we need government policies that support women in their dual roles as breadwinners and caregivers, like paid family leave, sick leave, and affordable

childcare. We also need strong equal pay laws across the country that show our commitment to valuing women's labor. And, we need the private sector to step up by creating family-friendly workplaces. Men especially need to take advantage of policies like paid family leave and take on more care work at home, so that they can bond early with their children and become more invested in care over the long run. I firmly believe that we will never achieve gender equality in the world until we achieve it at home.

Ultimately, none of these changes will make a lasting impact if we and our culture don't change. You cannot shift policy without also shifting culture, and vice versa. And that is really the work we hope to accomplish with my newest film *The Great American Lie*. I love being a filmmaker because I think documentaries are one of the most powerful tools we have for shifting attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately transforming culture. My hope is that this film inspires us to have a national (and international) conversation about our values, and the need to elevate the values we have "feminized," like care, empathy, and collaboration, above those we associate with masculinity, like power, dominance, and aggression.

Eisler: The Center for Partnership Studies (CPS) developed new metrics, Social Wealth Economic Indicators (SWEIs; CPS, n.d.) showing the economic value of the "women's work" of caring for people both in the short run (reducing poverty, etc.) and in the long run (producing the high-quality human capital needed in our post-industrial knowledge/service age), and we are now developing a Social Wealth Index (SWI), a project to which you are an advisor. How can we bring these new economic measures to the attention of policy makers to adopt as a more realistic and gender-sensitive alternative to GDP?

Siebel Newsom: Keep doing what you are doing! The more we talk about these issues with research and reports, films, op-eds, interviews, etc., the more policy makers start to pay attention. As First Partner in California, I try to do a lot of behind-the-scenes work to ensure that we are always thinking about these issues with a holistic view, and

that we factor in gender and gendered values as a lens through which to see the whole picture.

Eisler: What messages do you have for women leaders today?

Siebel Newsom: My message to women leaders today is to keep empowering and raising up the women and girls around you. If there is anything that we have learned over the last few years, it is that we must turn to what unites us and drives us toward a more equitable and just future for all. Let's not play into the vitriol and the division that only serves to divide us. Women collectively, and on their own, hold so much power! Let's use our voices and platforms to ensure that the next generation of women don't have to make the same difficult sacrifices we all have had to make in order to pursue motherhood and leadership.

Eisler: What are the most effective steps we all can take to accelerate the movement to a more just and caring partnership economy and society?

Siebel Newsom: Change is best accomplished by attacking it at the personal, private, and public levels. On the personal front, we need to exercise our consumer power and our civic power. We need to vote with our wallets for companies that represent our values, and vote with our ballots for the candidates and policies that will help create the world we want to see. And, we need to examine our own biases and attitudes. We cannot change the world before we change ourselves. In the private sector, businesses need to ensure that they are taking care of their employees with family-friendly workplace policies. They need to exercise moral capitalism or inclusive capitalism, pursuing a multiple bottom line model where people and the planet are prioritized alongside profits. And, in government, we need to advocate for policies that support a caring economy and elect officials who will support those policies. And, like my hero Riane Eisler always says, "Budgets are a statement of our values." We need to prioritize

caring sectors like health, education, and childcare, over more “masculine” sectors like war, weapons, and incarceration.

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Jennifer Siebel Newsom is a filmmaker, thought leader, and the First Partner of California. For more than a decade, Jennifer has been at the forefront of changing our society’s limiting gender norms and stereotypes. She wrote, directed, and produced three critically acclaimed and widely seen documentaries on the subject, *Miss Representation*, *The Mask You Live In*, and *The Great American Lie*, and founded The Representation Project, a nonprofit that uses film and media to catalyze cultural transformation. Since becoming First Partner, Jennifer has championed issues related to raising healthy, whole children and advancing gender equity, including the launch of her first initiative, #EqualPayCA. Jennifer serves as an appointed member of the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission, and is the Co-Founder of the California Partners Project which focuses on supporting women’s representation on boards and helping communities better navigate the impact of media and tech on our kids.

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 [The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future](#), *Sacred Pleasure*, *Tomorrow's Children*, *The Power of Partnership*, and [The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics](#). Her recent [Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future](#) (co-authored with Douglas Fry; Oxford University Press, 2019) combines her research with findings from the social and biological sciences, especially neuroscience. Eisler keynotes conferences worldwide and consults for governments on the partnership model. She authored over 500 articles for outlets including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, and *International Journal of Women's Studies*.

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