What is the link between intimate violence and war? Why do societies that treat women with respect fare better? A movement challenges traditions of violence in the family.

Every day, the headlines assault us with death and destruction. We read of brutal attacks that maim and kill civilians and even target children. The torture of prisoners and beheading of hostages in Iraq. The carnage in Sudan and the Congo. Despite anti-war protests by millions of people, despite promises by politicians that preemptive wars will bring security, despite a global peace movement teaching nonviolent conflict resolution, war and terrorism continue unabated. What fuels this firestorm of violence—and how can we stop it?

We’re sometimes told violence is “human nature.” But findings from sociology, psychology, and neuroscience show that a major factor in whether people commit violence is what happens during a child’s early formative years. As research from Harvard University and Maclean Hospital shows, the brain neurochemistry of abused children tends to become programmed for fight-or-flight, and thus for violence.

When children experience violence, or observe violence against their mothers, they learn it’s acceptable—even moral—to use force to impose one’s will on others. Indeed, the only way they can make sense of violence coming from those who are supposed to love them is that it must be moral.
Terrorism and chronic warfare are responses to life in societies in which the only perceived choices are dominating or being dominated. These violent responses are characteristic of cultures where this view of relations is learned early on through traditions of coercion, abuse, and violence in parent-child and gender relations.

It’s not coincidental that throughout history the most violently despotic and warlike societies have been those in which violence, or the threat of violence, is used to maintain domination of parent over child and man over woman. It’s not coincidental that the 9/11 terrorists came from cultures where women and children are terrorized into submission. Nor is it coincidental that Afghanistan under the Taliban in many ways resembled the European Middle Ages—when witchburnings, public drawings and quarterings, despotic rulers, brutal violence against children, and male violence against women were considered moral and normal. Neither is it coincidental that, in the U.S. today, those pushing “crusades” against “evil enemies” oppose equal rights for women and advocate harshly punitive childrearing.

For much of recorded history, religion has been used to justify, even command, violence against women and children. The subjugation of women and children is still the central message of many fundamentalist religious leaders today—leaders who, not coincidentally, also advocate “holy wars.”

Many religious and secular leaders have spoken out against international terrorism and wars of aggression. But we urgently need to hear their voices raised also against the intimate violence that sparks, fuels, and refuels international violence. Far too many customs and public policies still accept, condone, and even promote violence against women and children.

I’m passionately involved in an initiative to change this. The Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV) aims to end violence against women and children by engaging the moral authority of spiritual and religious leaders. More than 80 percent of the world’s people identify with a religious faith and look to religious leaders for guidance. SAIV was formed to encourage enlightened spiritual and religious leaders to speak out against intimate violence as strongly as they do against terrorism and war. This is essential, not only for the many millions whose lives are taken or blighted by terror in the home, but for us all, because intimate violence teaches that it is acceptable to use force to impose one’s will on others.

SAIV has gathered a council of leaders who are prepared to break the silence on this pivotal issue. Among them are Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan; A.T. Ariyatne, the leader of the Sarvodaya peace movement of Sri Lanka; Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mohandas Gandhi; Betty Williams, Irish Nobel Peace Laureate; Bill Schulz, director of Amnesty International; Janet Chisholm, chair of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship; Irfan Ahmad Khan, president of the World Council of Muslims for Interfaith Relations; Kalon Rinchen Khando, Tibetan Minister of Education for the Dalai Lama; Harvey Cox, professor at the Harvard Divinity School; Jane Goodall; and Deepak Chopra. Under the direction of Jim Kenney, former director of the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions, SAIV is reaching out to religious and spiritual leaders, health professionals, policy makers, teachers, and parents to discuss the link between intimate and international violence.

Cultures of war or peace

Surprisingly, none of our conventional social categories takes the relationship of intimate violence and international violence into account. Indeed, classifications such as religious versus secular, right versus left, East versus West, and developed versus developing do not tell us whether a culture’s beliefs and institutions—from the family, education, and religion to politics and economics—support relations based on nonviolence and mutual respect, or rigid rankings backed up by fear and force.

In studying societies across cultures and epochs, looking at both the public and personal spheres, I discovered configurations that transcend conventional categories. Since there were no names for these configurations, I coined the terms partnership model and dominator or domination model.

Hitler’s Germany (a technologically advanced, Western, rightist society), Stalin’s USSR (a secular leftist society), fundamentalist Iran (an Eastern religious society), and Idi Amin’s Uganda (a tribalist society) were all violent and repressive. There are obvious differences between them. But they all share the core configuration of the domination model. They are characterized by top-down rankings in the family and state or tribe maintained through physical, psychological, and economic control; the rigid ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half; and a high degree of culturally accepted abuse and violence—from child- and wife-beating to chronic warfare.

The partnership model, on the other hand, is based on a democratic and egalitarian structure in both family and state or tribe and on equal partner-
How a society structures the primary human relations—between the female and male halves of humanity, and between them and their children—is central to whether it is violent and inequitable or peaceful and equitable.