

Practicing Compassion and Human Rights

OBJECTIVES

- To explore the link between human rights and a compassionate society.
- To examine the morality of pluralism.
- To consider where and how we can transform towards a compassionate society.

IN THIS SESSION

Human rights may come from our hearts, our history, and our common humanity, but as practitioners of human rights, we are propelled by their universality. Irrespective of gender, class, creed, or any other distinction, human rights apply to everyone. Our vocation—be it legal, economic, social, or other—is to press for a world where every human life is valued the same. Former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali described the complexity and the challenge of universality. He said:

Human rights, viewed at the universal level, bring us face-to-face with the most challenging dialectical conflict ever: between “identity” and “otherness”, between the “myself” and “others”. They teach us in a direct straightforward manner that we are at the same time identical and different.⁸

[Human rights] teach us in a direct straight-forward manner that we are at the same time identical and different.

For this reason, we advocate for laws and practices that promote and safeguard human rights for all, regardless of the fears, prejudices, and traditions that may exist in our society. Human rights can stand apart from petty grievances and deep-seated bigotry and be a bulwark against unfair or

8. Address by the UN Secretary-General at the opening of the World Conference on Human Rights, 1993, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=7906&LangID=E>.

unlawful treatment, even when individuals in a community dislike or distrust each other. In this way, human rights are both a standard by which we measure human civility and a program for progress where civility does not exist because of social tensions or outright violent conflict.

When we deeply disagree with the practices of a regime or a community, we can use human rights to guide how we respond. We remind ourselves that we must respect a group's free speech, their right to practice their faith as they choose, their right to raise their children within their own culture, and so on. And then, within and between those rights we are working to uphold, we try to change the group's practices that we believe contradict human rights. For example, human rights workers in India fighting child labor in the carpet industry acknowledge and address the abject poverty that drives children to the looms, as well as family sovereignty, the right to work, the need for education and alternative ways of ending child hunger, and the complex forces of the free market. They cannot simply close down all factories that violate child labor laws, lest they risk dire unintended consequences for the very communities that they are trying to help—the loss of jobs, loss of revenue, disaffection, increased poverty, and even the potential for the children to starve. Instead, they use human rights to inform their compassionate pursuit of human rights.

However, as much as human rights provide a direction for progressive social change, human rights do not show us how to influence deep-seated beliefs. Something much more than fixing laws and changing practices is needed to alleviate suffering and end conflict caused by entrenched opinions and customs. Compassion helps us see, hear, and understand peoples' motivations and what triggers them to cause suffering. Understanding the perspectives of all parties to a conflict, appreciating their history, and knowing their stories give us a way forward. Without compassion, we may be able to change a law, but we will not dismantle chauvinism, prejudice, and mistrust. Compassion gives us tools with which to establish new relationships and new practices that lead to lasting change and peace.

In this session, we will begin with excerpts from an article by Charlotte Bunch on the relationship between the practice of human rights and a compassionate society. Bunch finds profound links between gender justice and the practical and legitimate implementation of human rights more broadly. She says that without a clear ethic of respect for the equal worth and value of every person's humanity, there can be no compassion. Next, we will read and discuss the fable of the elephant and the blind men, a traditional lesson about the risk of seeing only part of the whole picture, which sheds light on contemporary debates about pluralism. We will work through a short exercise deconstructing the fable, asking ourselves about the limits of human knowledge and understanding—in the real world does anyone really get to see the whole elephant? Are any perspectives authoritative? Or are all perspectives equal? Isaiah Berlin takes the middle ground in his erudite musings on pluralism and the human capacity for sympathy and shared common values. We will read short quotes by Berlin and discuss compassion in relation to pluralism.

In the final exercises, we will read and discuss Aruna Rao's recommendations for transforming organizations so that their internal workings resonate with their compassionate outward missions. Next, we will read about the creation of the Charter of Compassion, and consider strategies for integrating the Charter into our own work.

Human Rights as the Foundation for a Compassionate Society

Charlotte Bunch⁹

Excerpts

What do we mean when we speak about “compassion,” and what is the relationship between compassion and justice? While a compassionate society is a wonderful vision to work toward, we must be clear that we do not mean moving women back into the role of being the compassionate ones who must sacrifice themselves for others. A truly compassionate society can only be based on both men and women becoming more caring, and in particular, on society rewarding such values and activities. Indeed, the only path to a compassionate society is one in which the human rights of all are respected—women and men, children and the elderly, and every racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and national group, as well as people of every sexual orientation and physical ability. Without a clear ethic of respect for the equal worth and value of every person’s humanity, compassion runs the danger of being a form of charity and condescension toward those less fortunate. What is needed is a recognition of every person’s fundamental human right to share in the resources and participate in the process of directing the destiny of the planet. Striving for justice and the realization of human rights for all is a critical pathway on the road to creating a compassionate society. . . .

... Human rights is a language for talking about this responsibility, which forms the basis for building a compassionate society. This is the compassionate belief—that we all have a responsibility for creating the conditions for everyone to exercise their human rights and realize their humanity as fully as possible.

For women, this process of reinterpreting human rights principles from the perspective of our experiences and thus expanding the understanding of human rights is crucial to building a more inclusive vision of human rights. . . . Interpreting human rights from the perspective of women’s lives requires demonstrating how human rights apply to gender specific abuses—often in the private as well as public sphere. . . . In addition, utilizing feminist analysis of gender, many have gone on to demonstrate the connection between so-called women’s issues and other basic social concerns for development, peace, human rights, and more. In integrating a gender perspective on various social issues, it becomes clear that there is no possibility of human security, of peace, of a compassionate society, of sustainable development, or of justice, if one-half of the population is left behind. Further, for those who care about creating a non-violent society or want to end militarism and ethnic conflict, violence in the home undermines these goals as well.

A culture of respect for human rights cannot be built without women’s rights; indeed, when the human rights of any group no matter how small are denied, the human rights of all are diminished. Human rights can be a bridge to a discussion of a compassionate society for the twenty-first century, but only if this bridge is made large enough, and inclusive enough, for all to cross.¹⁰

9. Charlotte Bunch is the Founding Director and Senior Scholar of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University. She has been an activist, writer, and organizer in the feminist and human rights movements for over four decades.

10. Excerpts from “Human Rights as the Foundation for Compassionate Society,” by Charlotte Bunch, *Toward a Compassionate Society*, edited by Mahnaz Afkhami, Women’s Learning Partnership, 2002. P. 16.

This is the compassionate belief—that we all have a responsibility for creating the conditions for everyone to exercise their human rights and realize their humanity as fully as possible.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Does women’s historically lower status in society give women a unique perspective and capacity for compassion? Why or why not?
- If you look down on a group of people, or think less of them than yourself, is it possible to still feel compassion for them if they are suffering? Why or why not?
- Charlotte Bunch writes, “Without a clear ethic of respect for the equal worth and value of every person’s humanity, compassion runs the danger of being a form of charity and condescension toward those less fortunate.” What are some examples (hypothetical or from real life) of compassion being a form of charity and condescension? What are some examples of compassion among equals?
- What is the hypocrisy, as Bunch sees it, when you advocate for better human rights protections for a community about which you feel is backward, or corrupt, or licentious, or in some other way in need of improvement?

GROUP EXERCISE

The Blind Men and the Elephant

There is an ancient fable that goes:

Once upon a time, a wise king sought to show blind men an elephant. He asked all the blind men in the town to assemble. Once they were gathered, the king’s servant brought an elephant to the men. He placed one man’s hand on the trunk, another’s on an ear, another’s on the tusk, another’s on a foot, another’s on the back, and another’s on the tail. The king let the men study the beast, and then asked them—what is an elephant? The first answered, “An elephant is very much like a tree.” The second said, “No, no. An elephant is clearly like a basket.” The third, “An elephant is exactly like a ploughshare.” The fourth, “How can you say that? An elephant is like a pillar.” The fifth, “An elephant is like giant mortar.” And the sixth, “You are all wrong. An elephant is quite distinctly like a rope.” The blind men began to quarrel, arguing so loudly that they could no longer hear each other. The king called to them to stop. He told them, “Not one of you knows what is an elephant, because you only see one side of a thing.”

First, ask the group to consider arguments for why the blind men were correct and to describe how they would defend the truth of what the blind men said. Next, ask the group to argue why the blind men could never be correct. What distinguishes the two different arguments? Lastly, ask the group to consider the story if there were no king or servant—in fact if there were no such thing as a king or servant—and everyone in the world were blind. How would that make a difference to the story? Would the truth about what is an elephant be any different? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- What do you believe was the original meaning behind the elephant story?
- How does the elephant story apply to knowledge in the real world?
- Do people need to be the same to share the same truth?
- Is the world, with its different languages, cultures, and beliefs, more like the blind men touching different parts of the elephant? Or is it made up of blind men, servants, and kings, each having entirely different abilities, knowledge, and status?

TEAM EXERCISE

Break the group into teams of three or four participants. Ask each team how they would retell the story in their own words to explain different cultures and religious viewpoints. Ask the teams to select a volunteer to tell their version of the story to the group. After listening to the stories, ask the participants to consider the following:

- In any of the stories, did the king (or someone else) know the whole truth?
- In any of the stories, did no one know the whole truth?
- In any of the stories, were some people closer to the truth than others?

READING ASSIGNMENT

The Courage of our Admitted Ignorance

Isaiah Berlin¹¹

Excerpts

Let us have the courage of our admitted ignorance, of our doubts and uncertainties. At least we can try to discover what others require, by making it possible for ourselves to know men as they truly are, by listening to them carefully and sympathetically, and understanding them and their lives and their needs...¹²

I came to the conclusion that there is a plurality of ideals, as there is a plurality of cultures and of temperaments. I am not a relativist; I do not say “I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps”—each of us with his own values, which cannot be overcome or integrated... . But I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ... . If I am a man or a woman with sufficient imagination (and this I do need), I can enter into a value system which is not my own, but which is nevertheless something I can conceive of men pursuing while remaining human, while remaining creatures with whom I can communicate, with whom I have some common—for all human beings must have some common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ...¹³

11. Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) was a political philosopher and historian of ideas. Born in Latvia, he immigrated to England. Considered one of the greatest scholars of his time, he was knighted in 1957. In his writing and speeches he made the case for pluralism and liberty, deeply wary of absolutes of any stripe—faith, politics, or moral order.

12. From <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berlin/>.

13. From *The Power of Ideas*, by Isaiah Berlin, Princeton University Press. 2002. Pp. 11-12.

Pluralism

Pluralism has many definitions and applications—political, social, cultural, and even scientific, among them. Frequently human rights and democracy advocates use pluralism to describe, “a social system based on mutual respect for each other’s cultures among various groups that make up a society, wherein subordinate groups do not have to forsake their lifestyle and traditions but, rather, can express their culture and participate in the larger society free of prejudice.”¹⁴

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- How would you contrast the quotes from Isaiah Berlin above with the elephant story? What is Berlin trying to say about truth and values?
- For you, is the elephant story a defense of pluralism, or does it reveal the fallacies of pluralism?
- Do you believe that even though people have different traditions and cultures, all traditions and cultures are equally valid? Why or why not? What about religions? Why or why not?
- Do you believe it is morally wrong to condemn cultures and beliefs that are different from your own? Or, alternatively, do you believe you have a moral obligation to tolerate cultures and beliefs that are different? Why or why not?
- If you genuinely believe someone’s tradition or practice is wrong, even injurious, by what right can you ignore the harm it causes under the pretext that everyone is entitled to his or her own beliefs?
- What are some examples of practices or beliefs that you do not share, but you tolerate? What are some examples of practices or beliefs that you do not share, and you think are intolerable in society? What lines are crossed when a practice or belief becomes intolerable?

READING ASSIGNMENT

Compassionate Society: How Do We Get There from Here?

Suppose we were able to identify which attributes should comprise a “compassionate society”—for instance social justice, gender equality, sustainable development, and spiritual peace. The real question, the real challenge, is how do we get there from here?

— Aruna Rao¹⁵

In her essay, “Leadership for Organizational Transformation and Gender Equality,” Aruna Rao describes her and her colleagues’ experiences of working to transform organizations towards greater gender equity, and in particular the case of BRAC, the internationally renowned anti-poverty organization in Bangladesh. She says, “To strengthen BRAC’s ability to improve its programs and its internal organization quality we drew links between structure and outcomes, quantity and quality,

14. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/pluralism>.

15. Aruna Rao is the Executive Director and cofounder of Gender at Work. Previously she was a Practitioner-in-Residence at the Global Gender Program at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University and the Leader of the BRAC Gender Team in Bangladesh.

and internal gender equity change to external gender equity outcomes.” Rao summarizes the lessons learned from BRAC and other organizational transformation efforts. They include the following (*emphasis added*):

- This *strategy does not attempt to “guilt” people into change* nor does it try to convince them using “brute rationality.”
- Supporting a learning process that accepts psychological resistance to change is effective by *working with both the heart and the head*.
- Effective *strategies are both systemic and personal* in that they concern themselves with systemic changes of culture and norms and with the individual learning of organizational members.
- *Dialogue* is a key tool.
- Effective strategies aim to *build the “field.”* This term is borrowed from science and refers to invisible, nonmaterial structures like gravity or magnetism. Applied to organizations it refers to principles, values, and purpose which allows organizational members, leaders, policies, structures, and systems significant room to adapt.
- The *feminist goals of social transformation need to be linked* to the espoused values of the organization. Positive change will not come about if there is no direct connection between women’s empowerment, gender transformation, and the explicit values of the organization.
- It is critical to start from where people are. . . We must negotiate with members of the organizations, and discover what they see as the issues regarding gender and women’s issues in that context. Negotiation is not simply a tactic to increase the enthusiasm of those with whom one is engaging in the organizations; what is also up for negotiation are the ideas, perspectives, and stance of the change agent. Admitting our own political commitment means that *we need to be aware [of]...our own subconscious*, those very aspects we say we are trying to change.
- We need to *examine organizational work practices*. How does the organization get the job done? What does an organization do to get the job done? What does this tell you about aspects of “deep structure?” By examining work practices, we can uncover the dissonance between organizational values and culture. . .
- It is important to *bring silent voices to the surface*, or conscious level, of the organization, and recognize that in every organization there are contesting meanings. Listening to one group of voices within or outside the organization tells you only one part of the story. By adding into the mix hitherto silent voices, the picture fills out.
- Finally, we need to challenge the “process-outcome split.” We have a tendency to focus on outcomes rather than process, not recognizing *process itself may be an outcome....* The organization needs to pay attention to gender equity and to deep structure all the time.¹⁶

16. Excerpts from “Leadership for Organizational Transformation and Gender Equality,” by Aruna Rao, *Toward a Compassionate Society*, edited by Mahnaz Afkhami, Women’s Learning Partnership, 2002. P. 32.

Negotiation is not simply a tactic to increase the enthusiasm of those with whom one is engaging in the organizations; what is also up for negotiation are the ideas, perspectives, and stance of the change agent.

| QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- What is “compassionate” about Rao’s transformation objectives?
- What is “compassionate” about her strategies for transformation?
- What lessons does Rao cite that have wider relevance to transforming society?

| PARTNER EXERCISE

Divide the participants into pairs to discuss practices and beliefs in their family, work, or community that lack gender awareness (an activity or custom where the wisdom and/or influence of one gender is usually disregarded or ignored. One example might be fire brigades that frequently do not consult with women in the community about tactics and priorities in an emergency). What could they do to address this lack of gender awareness? When the group reconvenes, ask a volunteer from each pair to share their ideas for transforming practices.

The Charter

The British author Karen Armstrong has written extensively on religion. She is a former Roman Catholic nun, widely admired for her writings on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In 2008, Karen Armstrong won the TED Prize,¹⁷ a cash prize and opportunity to make a wish to change the world. Armstrong's wish was for the creation of a Charter for Compassion, written by "a group of inspirational thinkers from the three Abrahamic traditions, and based on the fundamental principles of universal justice and respect." As of December 29, 2014, more than 110,000 people from around the world had affirmed the Charter.¹⁸ The text of the Charter follows:

Charter of Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the center of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries.

Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

17. TED is a non-profit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less). TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment, and Design converged, and today it covers almost all topics—from science to business to global issues—in more than 100 languages. TED talks can be found at <https://www.ted.com/talks>.

18. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charter_for_Compassion.

Compassion impels us to... honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Do you believe compassion can be taught? Is it something a person is born with or not, or can it be learned?
- How can you foster compassion at your organization? Are there specific areas in your organization's structure and/or practices where more compassion would bring greater equity and transparency and raise morale? Where would you like to see more compassion within your organization?
- Are there specific areas in your organization's work where more compassion would make the organization more effective and more true to its mission? Where would you like to see more compassion in your organization's programs?
- Can you imagine ways to increase compassion at home, within your extended family, and even in your neighborhood?